

ABSTRACT

LEE, GABRIEL FRANCIS. *Constructing the Outer Banks: Land Use, Management, and Meaning in the Creation of an American Place*. (Under the direction of Matthew Morse Booker.)

This thesis is an environmental history of the North Carolina Outer Banks that combines cultural history, political economy, and conservation science and policy to explain the entanglement of constructions, uses, and claims over the land that created by the late 20th century a complex, contested, and national place. It is in many ways a synthesis of the multiple disparate stories that have been told about the Outer Banks—narratives of triumph or of decline, vast potential or strict limitations—and how those stories led to certain relationships with the landscape.

At the center of this history is a declension narrative that conservation managers developed in the early 20th century. Arguing that the landscape that they saw, one of vast sand-swept and barren stretches of island with occasional forests, had formerly been largely covered in trees, conservationists proposed a large-scale reclamation project to reforest the barrier coast and to establish a regulated and sustainable timber industry. That historical argument aligned with an assumption among scientists that barrier islands were fundamentally stable landscapes, that building dunes along the shore to generate new forests would also prevent beach erosion. When that restoration project, first proposed in 1907, was realized under the New Deal in the 1930s, it was followed by the establishment of the first National Seashore Park at Cape Hatteras in 1953, consisting of the outermost islands in the barrier chain. The idea of stability and dune maintenance continued to frame all landscape management and development policies throughout the first two decades after the Park's creation. When scientists proved convincingly in the early 1970s that those assumptions were

incorrect, that barrier islands were inherently migratory and dynamic, and that shoreline dunes actually accelerated the loss of beaches, the relationships that had been constructed on the landscape prevented a fundamental shift in land management policy.

The inability of new science to lead to new ways of living with the Outer Banks reflected the deep investments, both economic and cultural, that many thousands of people had in keeping the place as it was in 1970. To contextualize those investments, this thesis examines both the marketing of the northern banks in the 1920s and the creation of new, nationalizing narratives about the shore and its past that re-conceptualized the meaning of the Outer Banks. Those who invested in the Banks by the early 1930 and those new narratives helped to steer the New Deal conservation effort, and the commercialization of the Outer Banks blossomed in the postwar era. The relationships that resulted from that marketing of the place and its past in many ways served to create the cultural landscape that existed in the 1970s.

Local villagers—“Bankers”—also shaped the Outer Banks throughout the 20th century, and their cultures, their claims on the land, and their collaboration with or resistance to development and conservation are all explored. Indeed, much of this story is the transformation of a local place, and those who lived intimately with the land for generations brought unique perspectives to those changes. This thesis traces island settlement back to the earliest records in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, but it also shows that in many ways those societies formed around and in response to state and federal governmental projects. In fact, the entanglement of desires for the coast was nothing new, but the scale, complexity, and seeming intractability of those constructed relationships by the late 20th century defined the modern Outer Banks.

Constructing the Outer Banks: Land Use, Management, and Meaning in the Creation of an
American Place

by
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DEDICATION

To my mother and father who supported
so many versions of me.

BIOGRAPHY

Gabriel Francis Lee was born and raised in Fairmont, West Virginia, where he lived the first 24 years of his life. He attended his hometown institution, Fairmont State University, for his undergraduate education, where he earned a BA, double majoring in History and French, and graduated summa cum laude in May of 2003. Before entering college, Gabriel discovered stone masonry, first apprenticing for, then mastering, a skill that would become a lifelong vocation. Following graduation, Gabriel moved from West Virginia to join a stone mason and friend in North Carolina. A year later, he spent seven months abroad teaching English to high school- and middle school-aged students in Rethel, a small town in northeastern France. Upon returning, he commenced the graduate work that would prepare him to master his intellectual vocation as a historical scholar. Gabriel was lucky to attend North Carolina State University, because there, in pursuit of his Master's degree, he received not only a strong education among an outstanding group of scholars, but also, and more importantly, met some of the people who are dearest to his heart.

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Above all, I would like to share my most heartfelt gratitude for the tremendous support my family has given me throughout the years: to my brother, Jeremy, without whose companionship my life would have been very different and much impoverished; to my sister, Jennifer, for whom I have a special place in my heart; to Betty Pat and all of the Pratts, who became nothing less than extended family; to Bob Kettig, without whose love for the Outer Banks and generosity in letting me tag along on vacations I would never have seen the North Carolina shore; and, finally, to my mother and father who always believed that I could accomplish anything, let this serve as evidence that I have at least accomplished something.

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INTRODUCTION

“There are few names more widely known in the United States or localities about which a greater ignorance prevails than Cape Hatteras,” began North Carolina naturalist H.H. Brimley in 1905.¹ Brimley went on, in this article written for the *Charlotte Daily Observer*, to inform fellow North Carolinians distant from the shore about the peculiarities of the coastal realm. By writing, Brimley hoped to bridge that distance and bring his readers to the outer banks.

People have been writing about the North Carolina barrier shore for a long time. They have not always seen the same place. These are among the multiple ways authors have sought within their first paragraphs to convey the meaning of the Carolina banks: “This island had many goodly woods, and full of Deere, Conies, Hares, and Fowle, even in the midst of Summer, in incredible abundance,”² (Arthur Barlowe, 1584); “There is now no access to the ocean, through the sand-reef, so good and deep as the narrow Ocracoke Inlet . . . which passage opens upon an unsheltered and most dangerous sea coast,”³ (Edmund Ruffin, 1861); “You will see that there is little wealth and no luxurious living . . . I suppose few of [the locals] see two hundred dollars a year. They are friendly . . . and I think there is rarely any real suffering among them,”⁴ (Wilbur Wright, 1900); “The North Carolina coast has a

¹ H.H. Brimley, *A North Carolina Naturalist: H. H. Brimley, Selections from His Writing*, ed. Eugene P. Odum, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 25.

² Arthur Barlow, “Arthur Barlowe’s Narrative of the 1584 Voyage,” in *Virginia Voyages from Hakluyt*, eds., David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 3.

³ Edmund Ruffin, *Agricultural, Geological and Descriptive Sketches of Lower North Carolina and the Similar Adjacent Lands*, (Raleigh: Institute for the Deaf & Dumb & the Blind, 1861), 115.

⁴ Marvin W. McFarland, ed., *The Papers of Wilber and Orville Wright: Including the Chanute-Wright letters and other Papers of Octave Chanute*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1953), 26.

siren quality. Rosy conch shells and galaxies of starfish stud the sandy white beaches,”⁵ (Nike Anderson, 1955); “Above Cape Hatteras, on the North Banks, is Kill Devil Hills, scene of the Wright brothers’ first flights . . . Opposite, on Roanoke Island, is Fort Raleigh, site of the first attempts at English colonization in America,”⁶ (David Stick, 1958); “In building the high coastal dunes along the Outer Banks, man has created a new state in the beach system that may be detrimental to the long-range stability of the barriers,”⁷ (Robert Dolan, 1972); “Dedication: To our children and grandchildren with the hope that they too will have a beautiful Carolina shoreline to enjoy,”⁸ (Orrin Pilkey et. al, 1980); “The Outer Banks region is an attractive place to live in or to visit. The separation of the islands from the mainland provides a sense of being ‘at sea,’”⁹ (Dirk Frankenberg, 1995); “It went from Paradise to nothing,”¹⁰ (Leslie Hooper, Salvo resident, 2004).

The outer banks have been many things to many people. The stories that were told about the barrier shore reflected the different desires that people had for the land or how the place they discovered compared to the more familiar spaces from which they came or an earlier remembered banks. Over time, locals, mariners, governmental bodies and, increasingly, temporary visitors and scientists embroidered their manifold narratives onto the

⁵ Nike Anderson, “October Holiday on the Outer Banks,” *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. 108, no. 4 (Oct. 1955), 501.

⁶ David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina, 1584-1958*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 1.

⁷ Robert Dolan, “Barrier Dune System Along the Outer Banks of North Carolina: A Reappraisal,” *Science*, New Series, vol. 176, no. 4032 (April 21, 1972), 286.

⁸ Orrin H. Pilkey, Jr., William J. Neal, Orrin H. Pilkey, Sr., and Stanley R. Riggs, *From Currituck to Calabash: Living with North Carolina’s Barrier Islands*, second edition, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1980, first published in 1978), book dedication.

⁹ Dirk Frankenberg, *The Nature of the Outer Banks: Environmental Processes, Field Sites, and Development, Corolla to Ocracoke*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1.

¹⁰ Leslie “Les” Hooper, interview by Barbara Garrity-Blake, Salvo, NC, 10 July 2004, National Park Service, Outer Banks Oral History Library, Outer Banks History Center, 649.

landscape to create by the late 20th century a place thick with disparate constructions, uses, and claims. The end result was an Outer Banks that existed in cultural and physical tension. Tensions may be intuitive to travelers seeking authenticity and natural space at Cape Hatteras as they drive past the developed north banks around Kitty Hawk and Nags Head. Along the postindustrial landscape of strip malls, mini golf establishments and restaurants all marketing Outer Banks themes, the place has become a cheap reproduction of itself. Yet that surface confusion only points to something deeper and more fundamental. The Outer Banks have become an ironic place, made to satisfy multiple opposing demands. The landscape is both natural and commercialized, it maintains biological preserves near urbanized settlements, it is peripheral and yet a centralizing cultural icon, and the land itself is migratory yet made and remade to support static settlements. Despite the placid images that many visitors carry to the shore, there is plenty of space for conflict.

The modern Outer Banks is in many ways a product of the multiple stories that have been told about the place in the past, narratives that framed arguments determining how the landscape could and should be used. Narratives of American progress and ingenuity overlaid stories of environmental decline and redemption, or simply decline. Tales of romance and freedom folded into those of profit, artifice, and loss. The entanglement of these meanings that different people imposed on the seashore produced the complex and widely beloved place that late-twentieth-century travelers could find at the North Carolina coast.

Among the most important stories told about the outer banks was the historical narrative of environmental decline that conservationists developed in the early 20th century. The presumptions underlying that argument, that the islands were naturally stable landmasses

that supported widespread forests, and which local loggers had since cleared and destabilized, led to a large-scale landscape engineering project under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to stabilize the shore and re-vegetate the land. Workers constructed a large wall of shoreline dunes during the 1930s to prevent overwash and supposedly prevent beach erosion, and that engineering of the coast to 're-nature' the outer banks both led to the National Park Service's establishment of the first national seashore at Cape Hatteras in 1953 and also accelerated rates of development. The Park Service continued the policy of shoreline dune maintenance. Behind the protective dunes, the state constructed new roads and developers in the villages exempt from the seashore park build new properties up to the shoreline. Increasingly the constructed meaning of the Outer Banks became what the hundreds of thousands and then millions of annual visitors following that road wanted the place to be.

The importance of the reclamation project and the creation of the park ran much deeper still. The outer banks had long been part of federal projects for manipulating the shore in the interest of commercial maritime trade, but the New Deal project, and the park that followed, brought federal managers to bear directly on the landscape and the land's productivity for the first time. In restoring the land, new managers controlled the area and determined how island resources would be used. Rather than restoring the forests that locals had supposedly destroyed and allowing them to be sustainably harvested for industry, the Park Service determined that the restored land would be set aside for recreational purposes. The seashore park's creators attempted to establish new uses for the land that would benefit all users. Locals were to retain their villages and rights of access to shore fisheries, and the general public could enjoy undeveloped recreational beach space. But it was a federal

decision, decided between politicians in Washington and Raleigh, and it marked a clear transition from an industrial to a postindustrial consumer economy on the outer banks.

The new direction of the Outer Banks, the way that nature would be used and the seashore made profitable, was also wrapped up in the stories that preceded the New Deal project and the cultures that had been formed locally. By the 1920s there were two distinct groups, each attempting to make the banks land profitable in different ways. It was these two desires for the banks that the Cape Hatteras National Seashore sought to fulfill. On the one hand, local villagers, largely making a living in commercial fisheries and from federal employment in the US Lifesaving Service, sought to modify the land for productive purposes. They constructed modest and tight-knit societies around their resource base, the coastal climate, and the limits of the landscape. Others came to the outer banks during the summer and winter for recreational purposes, either for health and relaxation or as sportsmen hunting waterfowl in the 19th century. In the 1920s, boosters began marketing those amenities of the undeveloped shore on the north banks, in the Kitty Hawk-Nags Head area. Not only did developers extol the natural setting, but they also began making claims on the past, telling new stories about the meaning of the outer banks in a national context. It was then, in the post-World War I era, that the outer banks most definitively became linked to national narratives—especially Sir Walter Raleigh’s so-called “lost Colony” which attempted to settle Roanoke Island in the 1580s, and the Wright brother’s first successful experiment with a heavier-than-air flying machine at Kitty Hawk in 1903. By inviting tourism and making the land productive for locals in a new way, through preservation rather than

industry, and by creating a new national public space, the Park Service intended the Cape Hatteras Park to satisfy multiple demands.

Desires for the Outer Banks converged over the road that the State Highway Commission constructed on Hatteras Island at the time of the park's creation. Over NC highway 12, bodies continually shuffled back and forth, giving locals access to increased amenities and opportunities, bringing outside money into locals spaces, and also bringing new custodians making new claims on the land and seeking profit through development. NC 12 became the economic lifeline of the postwar Outer Banks. That road, and that relationship, was built on the foundation of natural barrier island stability assumed by scientists since the turn of the 20th century. In the early 1970s, that foundation quickly eroded.

New science proved definitively that barrier islands were inherently migratory landscapes that rolled landward with the rising sea. The shoreline erosion that conservationists thought they were preventing was actually sand displacement, a normal and necessary function of barrier island systems. The findings, furthermore, showed that any shoreline stabilizing structure, even soft structures like dunes, actually accelerates rates of beach loss. To continue the current policy meant courting future disaster. To fulfill their mandate of preserving the islands in their natural state, the Park Service relinquished dune maintenance in the mid-1970s. But instead of creating radically new relationships with the land that would allow the islands to move, management of the shore largely transferred to the North Carolina Department of Transportation which continued to construct dunes in the interest of protecting the road, and thus property and access. Because stabilized shoreline

structures destroy beaches, supporting dune maintenance forced the state to endorse a policy of “beach nourishment,” pumping dredging sand from the ocean bottom onto the shore and spreading it with bulldozers to form new beaches. Faced with the option of protecting property or protecting beaches, the state decided that, at great cost, they would do both. Over the last half of the 20th century, public dollars continually re-created “natural” space and maintained access to it on the Outer Banks.

Before the onset of coastal development, local villagers had long lived reactively with the volatile climate of the North Carolina coast. When hurricanes flooded the land and washed away houses, or when threatened by the slow march of a migratory dune, locals moved their homes, either back to their original plot or away from the dangerous area. The inability of those interested in the postindustrial Outer Banks to re-imagine relationships with the landscape that would allow for a moving shoreline reflected the deep investments, both economic and cultural, that many had made in the place as it was by 1970. It showed how deeply ingrained the new narratives had become.

This thesis is concerned not only with land use and the constructed meaning of place but also with the social consequences of those contested uses and constructions. Specifically, I examine the evolution of the outer banks as a cultural landscape, as a place in which uses of and ideas about the islands existed in tension among different users who forged new and lasting relationships with the place. Conveniently, but also revealingly, the term “Outer Banks” was a product of this reordering of social and physical space. Before the end of the New Deal project, the term does not show up in any historical document (that is not to say

that it definitely did not exist at all). In local newspapers and among project planners, and going back to colonial records, the islands were loosely referred to as “the banks,” “sand banks,” “the south banks,” “the barrier reef,”¹¹ and so on, and they began to be referred to as the “outer banks” in project documents only in the 1940s. The title was then capitalized as the “Outer Banks” and turned into a standardized place name by the early 1950s. The “Outer Banks” later became synonymous with a distinct area.¹² Many lines have been drawn in different places around the geographical extremities of the Outer Banks,¹³ but most often the designation came to refer to the northern peninsula and Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands, not

¹¹ “Sand banks” was the earliest term, used in 1699. *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, vol. 1, 514. “Banks,” either capitalized or not, was most common in the late 18th century, and “sea banks” was also used. For examples, see *Colonial Records*, vol. 10, 526; *State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 13, 285; *State Records*, vol. 22, 939. Use of the term “Banks” especially referred to Core Banks and barrier beaches nearer to the mainland. Ocracoke, called at the time Occacock, was most often referred to without a subsequent label as either an island or a bank, and Hatteras could appear alone or with either label. There was, in other words, little uniformity.

¹² The term Outer Banks was not employed in newspaper accounts in the early 1930s; Frank Stick’s proposal for a seashore park in the fall of 1933, often cited as the impetus to the New Deal project, does not use the Outer Banks label, and a report on the WPA sand fixation project published in 1937, “Man-Made Sand Dunes Saving Carolina Seashore,” *Science News Letter*, (June 19, 1937), 389-390, also does not use this title. William Engels, a zoologist who studied faunal distribution on certain islands during the 1940s and 1950s used the terms “outer banks” in his studies published in *The American Midland Naturalist* beginning in 1942 (see bibliography), which he offset by quotations to imply colloquial language and explained that it was a local title. The first use this author found of the capitalized title was a 1943 report by the director of the New Deal sand fixation project, A. C. Stratton, who wrote that this area was “known as the ‘Banks’,” which he qualified with quotations. Stratton freely uses the term Banks afterward without quotations, and uses the term Outer Banks, also set off by quotations, only in the report’s final sentence when referring to “the residents of the ‘Outer Banks’.” see A.C. Stratton, “Reclaiming the North Carolina ‘Banks’,” *Shore and Beach*, (April 1943), 25-27, 32. By the 1950s, “the Outer Banks” was regularly employed to refer to a certain subset of the barrier island system forming the North Carolina coast, though the limits of this subset remained contested. Ben Dixon MacNeill pointed out in *The Hatterasman*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1958), 38, that Ocracoke and Hatteras Islands were the original “outer banks” and that the term had only recently been applied to all of the North Carolina barrier islands from Shackleford Banks north “to the great indignation of the native population.” Because the term did not appear in documents before the 1930s, it is unclear that it was used to describe even these two islands before the 1930s project.

¹³ Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 1, argued that although the Outer Banks extends geographically to Cape Lookout, his study extended from Virginia only to Portsmouth Island “because it is the most southerly settlement on the Outer Banks.” Dunbar also admitted that “The term ‘outer banks’ is a recent one, and there is no uniformity in definition of its limits.” David Stick explained in an interview with the author, 16 April 2007, how he drew lines around the Outer Banks for his history which is the most widely read: “I arbitrarily chose where to put them, because I came across so much material on the Cape Lookout area, Shackleford Banks (west of Cape Lookout) especially, whaling down there, and the destruction of that whole community in 1899 from a hurricane.”

the Core Banks or anything below the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, after which the islands, a continuation of the same chain, become ecological preserves and recreational areas with no permanent residents.¹⁴ In other words, the Outer Banks for many people came to mean those barrier islands that attempted to preserve natural space beside human inhabitation, and which were economically dependent on tourism and development. The title Outer Banks, then, implies the constructed relationship that I seek to historicize. I thus employ two conceptual “banks” in this thesis, a lower case version, “outer banks,” indicating a geographical formation that includes the entire string of barrier islands, and a capitalized version, “Outer Banks,” referring to a certain subset of islands with specific and historic cultural meaning and management policies. The title of my thesis, “Constructing the Outer Banks,” intentionally plays with this dual meaning that represents both the physical and cultural reconstruction of the islands over the 20th century.

Much of this history concerns the ways that stories that have been told about a place, even as it seeks to tell a new, more comprehensive story. Most of those who have written about development and change on the Outer Banks fall into one of two camps: either they laud the newfound prosperity along with the successful preservation of natural areas, or they utterly condemn the massive development and ecological decline in recent decades.¹⁵

¹⁴ See for example *The Outer Banks 2007 Official Travel Guide*, (Manteo: The Outer Banks Visitor’s Bureau, 2007) and ADC The Map People, *Outer Banks: North Carolina Visitor’s Map, 13th edition*, (Langenscheidt Publishing Group). Dirk Frankenburg’s popular *The Nature of the Outer Banks: A Guide to the Dynamic Barrier Island Ecosystem from Corolla to Ocracoke*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) included his definition of the Outer Banks in the book’s subtitle without any attempt at further explanation of the Outer Banks’ limits. This range, which had been more recently inculcated as part of a tourism complex, was simply assumed.

¹⁵ A great examples of the ascension narrative is the most widely read history, David Stick’s *Outer Banks*, in which the final chapter on the New Deal project and postwar development is entitled “New Life for the Banks;” On the declension side, an essay written from an environmentalist’s perspective, and calling for a “bio-centric”

Whether their narratives are of triumph or of loss, writers are typically charged with emotion for the Outer Banks; if they do not approve what the banks have become, they love what the banks were in the past and what they might be in the future. In my telling, my purpose is not to navigate some middle ground between these arguments, but to examine and critique the arguments on their own terms; it is to understand how Americans created the Outer Banks, not to laud or condemn its creators. Many of those who initiated and supported the New Deal project that brought federal management to the islands strongly believed that they were acting for the benefit of all. Early developers did not foresee the rapid changes and large-scale development of the banks in the postwar period. There were unintended consequences of those choices and problematic assumptions on which much of the planning and development was based, but the intentions of historical actors must be emphasized.

A history of management, land use, and cultural change on the Outer Banks can help us think about larger historical trends in twentieth-century America. The Outer Banks can serve as a window onto contemporary desires for beaches and for natural space. In part ecological preservations, the Outer Banks can tell us how Americans—both vacationers and scientific managers—historically constructed the “natural.” Taking it a step further, such a history can also tell us about contemporary relationships to natural areas for recreation for both the visitor and the local. Environmentalists often argue for preservation and regulation as an end in itself; a history of competing interests in the creation of the Outer Banks helps to reexamine these assumptions by emphasizing issues of class (i.e., unequal access to public

approach to living with the coast, exemplifies this type of narrative: John E. Wierwille in “Remaking and Restoring the Landscape of Dare County, North Carolina,” in *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes*, ed. A. Dwight Baldwin, Judith De Luce and Carl Pletsch, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

power and decision making) and social and cultural (if not economic) dispossession.¹⁶ A history of Outer Banks conservation furthermore informs us about the ways in which centralized administrations relate to landscapes and management, and the potential hazards and benefits of such a relationship. The New Deal project generated a mass of surveys, estimates, and photographs to document a place that had been marginal before the 1930s. In doing so, project managers helped to reduce the outer banks to data, to turn the complex reality of a landscape into abstraction. That abstraction then became the reality for project managers, who applied scientific models that had worked for similar problems elsewhere, but which failed to solve problems on the barrier islands. Yet despite problematic models, economic and cultural investment in a bad idea wed locals, vacationers, North Carolina and the National Park Service to a certain type of relationship with the land, one that continued long after the scientific assumptions on which it was based were discarded.

While borrowing from studies of scientific management and tourism, investigating problems particular to the Outer Banks allows one to ask additional important questions. Faced with predictions of impending doom for the barrier islands if they are maintained as stationary landscapes, those both economically and culturally invested in the Outer Banks see no alternative for living with the place. How, then, do particular relationships with places become so naturalized that they seem as inevitable and irresistible as the climatic forces that promise to destroy those places? Debates over living on a mobile landscape also throw the

¹⁶ These are points central to the theses of several books, among them Louis Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). This history seeks to add to that growing literature.

issue of fixed property boundaries into question. How does continuing to live with barrier islands challenge modern Western cognitive maps for organizing space? What future models are possible, and can they take lessons from past uses? How can this debate guide us to more sophisticated and integrative uses of landscapes generally? Finally, understanding this relationship, which was clearly established by the 1970s when dune management could not be relinquished—where this thesis ends—can serve as a usable history for the present. As ocean levels rise, rates of erosion increase as the islands are forced landward, and beach replenishment fails as a long term solution. How Americans and, particularly, North Carolinians continue to live with beaches will be a relevant and contested topic for years to come.

This history connects to larger themes in the regional or national society, but it concentrates on a spatially-bound place. To understand the evolving uses of that place, I emphasize perspective, examining in detail the manner in which different groups of people sought to use the banks and how those uses clashed or entered collaborative relationships. I divide the narrative into four chapters, preceded by a prologue that lays out the geographic landscape and explains basic principles of barrier island geomorphology, allowing readers to place scientific assumptions into perspective as they arise. The narrative chapters are arranged chronologically and thematically.

Chapter One is a broad survey of land use on the outer banks from the earliest British encounters with the North Carolina coast in the 1580s to 1900, and examines the very different ways in which settlers and state officials over the 18th and 19th centuries understood

and sought to modify the land. To settlers, the outer banks landscape was a space that could be modified in limited ways for productive purposes, and they sought to manipulate local spaces through their labor to increase productivity. To colonial and state officials interested in maritime commerce and gaining wealth from their region, the outer banks were an impediment to trade. Colonial, state, and federal officials found many ways to try to mitigate the limitations that the barrier landmass imposed. By the late 19th century, federal projects included five lighthouses and 26 Lifesaving Stations between the Virginia border and Cape Lookout. Increasingly, local and federal purposes for the outer banks intertwined as federal employment provided new ways to make the land around the villages productive. This chapter also provides important background that enables the reader to place the claims that conservationists made after 1900 into perspective.

Chapter Two examines the two major societies making very different claims on the outer banks in the early twentieth century and especially beginning in the 1920s. This chapter is divided into two parts, each examining one society, and covers the years 1900 to 1933, when the New Deal project began. The first section details the societies that locals had constructed in the first three decades of the 20th century before the arrival of roads around commercial fisheries and employment in the US Lifesaving Service. That society is largely reconstructed from oral histories and supplementary accounts. The second section discusses the historic uses of the outer banks as a recreational area, dating back to the late 1830s, and how a separate group of “Outer Bankers” made temporary summer homes at Nags Head. Most importantly, that early settlement helped to propel the marketing of the seashore during the 1920s, and it was during that time that boosters made new claims on the past, began

emphasizing nationally significant stories, and developed the political connections that helped to convince the state to build infrastructure on the coast and also to steer federal projects in ways useful to local developers.

Chapter Three is the central chapter of this thesis. It examines the evolving conservation ideas about the outer banks, beginning in the late 1890s and ending with the creation of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in 1953. Chapter Three details the ideas behind the New Deal project, the context of those ideas in the first third of the twentieth century, and discusses the precedents from which conservationists borrowed models for thinking about the North Carolina shore. Among the major debates within the conservation movement was the ultimate use to which nature was put, either to industrial or recreational purposes, and the outer banks project becomes a revealing case study for thinking about this transition. Arguments concerning uses to which restored outer banks lands would be put is thus a central concern of this chapter. It ends with the creation of the Cape Hatteras Seashore, points out the compromises made in defining the new type of National Park Service holding, and discusses the collaborative or tense relationships that were entered into in the 1950s.

Chapter Four examines the constructed postwar Outer Banks, when the place became a product of the entangled uses of multiple Americans, all seeking to make the land into something conducive to the desires. This final chapter examines the changing Cape Hatteras Park policy from 1953 to the mid-1970s when the Park Service relinquished dune maintenance. New popular constructions of the shore as natural space, linked to national narratives, and made accessible by the road running through the islands, served to radically re-create the park in the postwar period, often to the detriment of locals' desires for

preserving their traditions. This chapter thus examines the ways that different people created a cultural and economic complex that could not do without continuing a policy of perpetual island stabilization.

PROLOGUE

Shaping the Outer Banks Landscape: Nature and the Barrier Coast

Shorelines are high energy environments. At the shore, the immense power of the ocean endlessly pounds and reshapes the land. What beachgoers hear as the rhythmic roar of the surf is the sound of a massive energy transfer; where ocean meets land the power of waves enters the shoreline regime and sediment is set in motion—eroding in one place, transported and deposited in another. Beaches form because sand is most adept at absorbing energy, but they are never stable.¹ Shorelines continually move.

Barrier islands are essentially extensive shores, islands and peninsulas of variable width separated from the mainland. Stretching intermittently from Quebec to the Gulf of Mexico, barrier islands like the North Carolina outer banks form an interface of energy from waves and wind against the land that protects the mainland from the full thrust of the ocean's power. Energy is incorporated into the barrier system, and barrier lands constantly change. On the ocean side, sediment is carried from north to south by littoral drift, the action of wave angle against the shore. Inlets that separate the islands, sites of interchange between the freshwater of eastern mainland watersheds and the saltwater ocean, migrate with littoral drift and also close and open in different places over time to maintain a dynamic equilibrium. Storm surges carry enormous sediment loads over the island that are either deposited on the land or dumped beyond the sound-side shore to build expansive marshland flats. Through the

¹ Stanley R. Riggs and Dorothea V. Ames, *Drowning the North Carolina Coast: Sea-Level Rise and Estuarine Dynamics*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Sea Grant, 2003), 15.

continual pressure of wind and waves against sand, the outer banks built up over time, shifted and shoaled, and moved landward with the rising ocean.²

The outer banks are exceedingly young by geological standards. Ten thousand years ago, they did not exist. Barrier islands were the product both of climatic change and the peculiar situation of the Atlantic coast. Unlike the Pacific, the Atlantic Ocean begins along a continental shelf that extends gradually outward for several hundred miles before dropping off much more rapidly. As the earth's climate cooled and warmed into periods of glacial advancement and retreat, global sea level correspondingly fell and rose. During the peak of the most recent glacial advance around 18,000 years ago, sea level is thought to have been around 330 feet below the present level, extending the North American landmass to the edge of the continental shelf. As sea level rapidly rose beginning more than 10,000 years ago, a rising ocean flooded the ancient coastal plain and inundated river valleys to create an irregular shoreline. Barrier islands, explained one geologist, "are the ocean's way of straightening out the shore." As wave energy eroded the protruding headlands of flooded river valleys and forced up riverine deposits, sediment accumulated as sand spits and offshore bars that eventually extended into masses of barrier lands. Atlantic barrier islands recognizable today formed around 5,000 years ago when sea level rise slowed to the present rate of roughly one foot per century and barrier migration slowed enough for vegetation to colonize the sand.³

² The basic properties of barrier islands in general and of the outer banks in particular is found in Robert Dolan and Harry Lins, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1986); A good study of extensive areas along the Atlantic barrier island chain is Stephen P. Leatherman, ed., *Barrier Islands from the Gulf of Saint Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico*, (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

³ Information explaining the creation of barrier islands is from Orrin Pilkey et. al., *The North Carolina Shore and Its Barrier Islands: Restless Ribbons of Sand*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 40-43, quote on 41.

The North Carolina barriers formed from a unique geological circumstance that, because of the gently-sloping coastal plain, created some of the largest and richest lagoonal estuaries in the world. The outer banks islands extend far distant from the mainland so that the opposite shore disappears in the horizon, enclosing the vast but very shallow Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds.⁴ Pamlico Sound, in fact, was so expansive that when the Italian explorer Giovanni de Verrazano arrived at the outer banks in 1524 he mistook Pamlico for the Sea of Cathay, thinking the Carolina banks to be a mere isthmus separating the Atlantic from the Pacific Ocean. Maps based on Verrazano show his mistake dramatically, detailing the North American landmass with a thin isthmus connecting what became Virginia from Florida and a great sea opening through the Midwest and widening westward, separating what became Mexico and Canada. North Carolina's barrier islands extend up to thirty miles from the mainland, reaching a peak distance at Cape Hatteras, at which point they change orientation sharply, from a southerly to southwesterly direction. Because the extended arm-and-elbow-shaped outer banks chain long blocked the encroaching ocean, the North Carolina mainland shores behind the banks clearly preserve the contour of former river valleys in a way that

According to Pilkey, p. 62, the slope of the coastal plain on which the outer banks rest averages 0.2 feet rise per mile; Periodization of glacial advancement and retreat were also from Pilkey and corroborated or supplemented with information from Donald R. Prothero and Robert H. Dott, Jr., *Evolution of the Earth*, 6th edition, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 508, 516-517, 538. The estimates for sea level at peak glaciation during the Pleistocene Epoch is a collaboration between the estimates given in the above two sources; Scientists are in conflict over the precise age of barrier islands and their maritime forests as well as Pleistocene sea level and the period of peak glaciation. The numbers included here represent the views of geologists who have studied the outer banks area most extensively.

⁴ That coastal plain slope determines lagoonal width is stated in V. Henderson, O.H. Pilkey, and A. Keyworth, "Global Controls of Barrier Island Chain Morphology and Distribution," *AAPG Bulletin*, vol. 73, no. 9, (Oct. 1989); E.W. Roelofs and D.F. Bumpus, "The Hydrography of Pamlico Sound," *Bulletin of Marine Science of the Gulf and Caribbean*, vol. 3, no. 3, (December 1953), 183, gave the average depths for Pamlico and Albemarle Sound as being 12.5 feet and 12 feet, respectively. This is of course an average that is offset by the extremely shallow sound borders, where marshlands abound. According to Pietrafesa, p. 3, Pamlico sound reaches a maximum depth above Bluff Shoal, which runs inward from Ocracoke Inlet, at around 24 feet.

other coastal areas do not. The particularly irregular shorelines at the heads of the Pamlico and Neuse rivers, where both rivers widen into freshwater and low brackish estuaries, appear remarkably similar to the contour of man-made lakes. These mainland shoreline profiles clearly demonstrate the function of North Carolina's barrier islands: they are essentially sand dams, separating the mainland from the ocean's energy regime and regulating the influx of salt water into the extensive estuaries that formed behind them.⁵

Mariners arriving at the outer banks quickly learned of the hazardous combination of commanding winds and treacherous topography that threatened to plow their vessels into that sand dam. The famous Virginian agronomist, Edmund Ruffin, noted this in the late 1850s: "The whole ocean of North Carolina is a terror to navigators, and is noted for the number of shipwrecks, and especially near Cape Hatteras."⁶ Though the banks were thin lands often a mile or less in width, the sandy substrate extended for miles in each direction, creating extensive marshland on the sound side and offshore shoals into the ocean that were especially hazardous around the capes—thus the appropriateness of appellations like Cape Fear. But navigating any part of the islands could be perilous. The outer banks became known as "The Graveyard of the Atlantic" for quite legitimate reasons, and the ribs of wrecked vessels characteristically littered the shore into the mid-twentieth century. As early as Sir Walter Raleigh's 1585 colonizing mission, an anonymous witness reported that one of their ships, "through the unskilfulnesse of the Master . . . strooke on the grounde, and sunke." Heavy

⁵ Verrazano's voyage is referred to in Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 5; Many of the Verrazano-based maps were reproduced in Lawrence C. Roth, *The Voyages of Giovanni de Verrazano, 1524-1528*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Pilkey, *North Carolina Shore*, 63, referred to the outer banks islands as a sand dam.

⁶ Edmund Ruffin, *Agricultural, Geological and Descriptive Sketches of Lower North Carolina and the Similar Adjacent Lands*, (Raleigh: Institute for the Deaf & Dumb & the Blind, 1861), 115.

winds and a difficult passage also caused John White, during his return mission to resupply the Roanoke colonists, to set out for the sea and return to England rather than exploring the coast, leaving the “Lost Colony” to their unknown fate. Over 500 vessels met their fate off of the outer banks coast between 1584 and the late twentieth century.⁷ The most extensive shoals extended from Cape Fear but, as Ruffin mentioned, Cape Hatteras was more dangerous. Hatteras juts out 30 miles into what has recently been dubbed “hurricane alley,” near the site where the warm, northward-flowing current of the Gulf Stream meets the cold, southward Labrador Current, generating a particularly volatile brew of weather conditions. Storms often began nearby. When gales blew into the dreaded Diamond Shoals that splayed around 14 miles outward from the Cape, passage was simply impossible. In 1905, prominent North Carolina naturalist H.H. Brimley’s wrote that from the top of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse the previous year, “I counted twenty-one sailing vessels, all of them three and four mast schooners, beating back and forth unable to get around the point of the shoals . . . a man connected with the life saving service told me that in August of the previous year, when the wind had remained southerly for twenty-six consecutive days, he counted no less than a hundred and five vessels weather-bound north of the Cape.”⁸

All land changes, but the energy system engaging the banks changed barrier lands more quickly than most, limiting uses of the islands and of the waters and mainland behind them. When European settlers sought to exploit the natural wealth of what became the North

⁷ David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, ed., *Virginia Voyages from Hakluyt*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 17, 102; William S. Ellis, “Lonely Cape Hatteras Besieged by the Sea,” *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. 130, no. 3 (Sept. 1969), 399-400.

⁸ Pilkey, *North Carolina Shore*, 25-26; H.H. Brimley, *A North Carolina Naturalist: H. H. Brimley, Selections from His Writing*, ed. Eugene P. Odum, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 28. The article republished in Odum’s book was originally written for the *Charlotte Daily Observer* in 1905.

Carolina colony, they had to contend with those limitations. The outer banks were shifty, unstable, inconsistent. The inlets through which settlers had to travel to get agricultural products to market shoaled, and channels of passage changed orientation. Inlets sometimes changed location entirely. Maps were inadequate. Those hoping to navigate the inlets without incident had to rely on the cognitive maps of local pilots with experiential knowledge. Historians can partially re-construct the past few hundred years of land profile changes using cartographic records, but in many ways the outer banks defied mapping.⁹

The environmental history of the outer banks and, indeed, of eastern North Carolina was greatly influenced by the geological morphology of the islands. Locals were always most sensitive to and sensible about landscape change on the coast. William Byrd recalled that in 1728 when parties from Virginia, which he led, and North Carolina set out to demarcate the border between their colonies beginning at Old Currituck Inlet, the first thing they did after exchanging official documents was to quarrel over the nature of the inlet. “This begat a Warm debate,” Byrd explained, “the Virginia Commissioners contending, with a great deal of Reason, to begin at the End of the Spitt of Sand, which was undoubtedly the North Shore of Corautck (Currituck) Inlet. But those of Carolina insisted Strenuously, that the Point of High Land ought rather to be the Place of Beginning, because that was fixt and certain, whereas the Spitt of Sand was ever shifting, and did actually run out farther now than formerly.” Each side intransigent, the argument stalled their project until the following morning when the Virginians conceded only after “positive proof was made by the Oaths of

⁹ The troubles mariners had with navigating the inlets through the outer banks are discussed in some detail in the first chapter of this thesis. The colonial government of North Carolina placed pilots at the inlets to provide mariners with their local, particular expertise, though they only remained for much time around Ocracoke Inlet. For more detail on pilots and the difficulties of navigation, see Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 21-24.

two Credible Witnesses” that the spit’s location had drastically changed. Had these men waited a few more years to conduct their survey, such an argument would not have taken place; Old Currituck Inlet closed sometime in the 1730s.¹⁰

Unpredictable inlets did much more than frustrate surveyors. Inlets were the sites of exchange between fresh water and salt water, where drainage from the 30,880-square-mile Albemarle-Pamlico watershed dumped an annual average of 49,000 cubic feet of freshwater per second into the ocean.¹¹ Calling breaks in barrier chains “inlets” describes the human uses of these waterways rather than their primary function of letting water out, but salt water regularly intruded the sounds at high tides. Inlet location was thus an important factor in determining the salinity and, therefore, the estuarine ecology of the sounds. In 1828 a different Currituck Inlet closed, shutting off Albemarle and Currituck Sounds from direct contact with the Atlantic Ocean thereafter, a condition which has lasted, with a short-lived interlude, to the present. Many observers remarked the profound changes in the 19th century, especially to Currituck Sound, as the estuaries above Roanoke Island changed from brackish to mostly fresh water. Edmund Ruffin noted many “evil effects” in his *Sketches of Lower North Carolina*: “The oysters and other sea shell-fish all died. The water-grasses were entirely changed in kinds, by the gradual or speedy dying out of all the species favored by salt-water. The mosquitoes were more numerous than ever known in the same localities

¹⁰ William Byrd, *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, ed. William K. Boyd, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), 44-46; The year of Old Currituck Inlet’s closing is from David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina, 1584-1958*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 9.

¹¹ The size of the watershed is from “TMDL Case Study: Albemarle/Pamlico Estuary,” website, EPA, *Office of Water*, <http://www.epa.gov/OWOW/tmdl/cs5/cs5.htm>, visited 1 August 2007; For the estimated amount of water draining into the sounds, see B.J. Copeland et al. *The Ecology of Albemarle Sound, North Carolina: An Estuarine Profile*, (Washington, DC: United States Department of the Interior, 1983), 17-18.

before or since.” About forty years after Ruffin, G.R. Weiland’s article in the *Journal of American Science* was more optimistic, calling the closing of Currituck Inlet in 1828 “One of the most important geological changes which has taken place along the Atlantic coast in recent time.” As Weiland explained, closing the inlet converted “upwards of one hundred square miles of shallow salt to brackish water area to fresh water,” resulting in changes in the vegetation that “brought countless thousands of ducks of species that had been only occasional before.”¹²

Though inlets usually closed with a whimper, new inlets opened with a bang. Inlets formed from the combination of powerful forces operating on the outer banks: wind and water. It was the same frequent violent storms, hurricanes and northeasters, so threatening to mariners that most dramatically changed the outer banks in the shortest time. Though inlets could be carved from oceanic overwash during storms, they most often blew apart from the sound side. As hurricane and northeaster winds pushed across the broad, shallow estuaries, they created a sloped water surface in the sounds, lowering the water level near the storm winds and increasing depth toward the mainland. To better understand the idea, it may be useful to think of how water reacts when it is blown from one direction across a saucer. As storms passed, they would displace water so that, for instance, 5 feet of water would be lowered in Albemarle and Currituck Sounds, raising the water level in Pamlico Sound 5 feet,

¹² Stick, *Outer Banks*, 6, mentioned the human-orientation of calling breaks in barrier islands “inlets”; Ruffin, *Descriptive Sketches*, 121; G.R. Weiland, “Currituck Sound, Virginia and North Carolina—A Region of Environmental Change,” *The Journal of American Science*, Fourth Series, vol. 4, no. 19, (1897), 76-77; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 35, asserted that increased waterfowl in the Albemarle Sound could have been a matter merely of perception since “the closing of the inlet just coincided with the beginning of waterfowl exploitation on the Atlantic Seaboard.” According to later evidence, this is mistaken. When the locks were removed from the Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal, locals complained of the great die offs of marsh grasses favorable to waterfowl and the subsequent loss of game. See “Waters of Currituck Sound Are Reported Fresh Again,” *The Independent, Elizabeth City*, (Jan. 27, 1933), front page.

or vice versa. When the storm crossed the sounds, wind direction reversed and shoved a wall of water sometimes ten feet or more in height crashing out of the sound, taking with it whatever may be in the path, whether sand, trees, livestock or houses.¹³ Redding R. Quidley, a local pilot and witness to the 1846 hurricane that cut both Hatteras and Oregon inlets, lived in the area destroyed by the creation of Hatteras Inlet. Quidley awoke the morning following the storm to see “live oaks (on land he had worked) washing up by the roots and tumbling into the ocean.”¹⁴

Storms on the outer banks changed not only the sites where waters met; they also moved the lands westward over time with the rising sea level. By displacing sediment across the islands from the beach to the sound, storm energy caused the islands to migrate at a rate generally corresponding to that of flooding on the mainland shore, thus maintaining a constant distance. Island migration was a continual feature of the Carolina banks. Geologists estimate that over the past 100 years the outer banks coast averaged three to five feet of retreat per year.¹⁵ The rate of island migration varied widely along the banks and, among many complex variables, depended largely on the underlying substrata of the submerged coastal plain. In some areas coastline change was relatively small. Cape Hatteras, on the other hand, was the most dynamic spot on the banks. When the federal government built the famous lighthouse at the cape in 1870, it was 1,500 feet from the shoreline; by 1935, it stood

¹³ Pilkey, *North Carolina Coast*, 46-47, 66-67, 82. Water displacement depends on the size, intensity, and direction of the storm. Hurricanes are smaller, more intense storms that originate near the equator, while northeasters are larger, slower storms that come from the direction indicated in their name. The saucer illustration is borrowed from Pilkey.

¹⁴ William Welch, “An Account of the Cutting Through of Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina, Sept. 7, 1846,” *Bulletin of the Essex Institute* (January, 1885), republished in *An Outer Banks Reader*, ed. David Stick, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 49.

¹⁵ Dolan, *Outer Banks*, 12-13, 26.

a mere 100 feet from the shore and had to be abandoned. In other areas, relict stumps of former forests littering beaches served as fixed points of reference to indicate island migration.¹⁶

There were two major mechanisms of island migration. The most important, transferring the greatest volume of sediment, was inlet formation. When an inlet formed, the passage of water produced extensive sand deltas on the inlet's sound side; over time, these deltas formed new marshland that quickly built up when the inlet closed. Jonathan Price noted this type of marshland formation in his survey of Ocracoke Inlet in 1795. Wrote Price: on a large shoal "called the South-Breaker . . . [there] is a bank of sand called Dry-Sand: which, except during a gale, is never covered with water. It is about one mile in length, and one half of a mile in breadth. Lately grass and some shrubs have grown on it, and it is not improbable it soon will have some trees."¹⁷ Besides inlet sedimentation, ocean surges carried massive sediment loads that were deposited on the sound side, building up existing marshlands that could become solid ground. Where the islands were wide, sediment load usually dropped earlier in the form of overwash fan deposits that built island elevation.¹⁸

Where sand accumulated and dried, the constant high winds on the outer banks pushed much of it across the landform to build up as dunes or to rest on a watery bottom.

¹⁶Pilkey, *North Carolina Coast*, 1-2, 51. Orrin Pilkey, a geologist at Duke University who has done more than anyone else to popularize the concept of barrier migration, likes to point out that a large portion of the seashells washing up on the outer banks beaches are actually fossils of ancient shellfish that thrived in estuarine environments. In other words, they lived in the waters behind the islands. Stumps on beaches have been recorded by many witnesses, most notably from Wash Woods not far from the Virginia state line. An early assessment that stumps on beaches were definitely from shoreline retreat instead of near-shore forests, though this was not at the time thought of as proof of migration, was recorded in Clair A. Brown, *Vegetation of the Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 51-52. Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was finally moved in 1999 to ensure its preservation.

¹⁷ Dolan, *Outer Banks*, 7-9; Jonathan Price, "A Description of Occacock Inlet," (Newbern: Francois-X Martin, 1795), reprinted in *The North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1926), 627.

¹⁸ Dolan, *Outer Banks*, 10.

The outer banks were made almost entirely of quartz sand. Faced with a volatile climate, salt spray from the ocean, and largely sterile soils, vegetation along the banks was often sparse and patchy, colonizing wherever chance allowed and failing often. Vegetative distribution, and thus the possibilities for productive use of the land, varied with the changes in topography, responding both to island width and elevation, and speciation responded to climatic variation as the barrier lands extended toward the ocean. Much of the plant distribution depended on resistance to or distance from salt spray. Generally, the island profile changed from beach on the eastern shore to a series of short, irregular dunes, to sand flats of grasses, shrubs, and stunted trees, before flattening out into extensive marshlands, sufficiently hard-packed for people to walk on without fear of sinking. Only grasses highly resistant to ocean spray, such as sea oats, could colonize the tops of shoreline dunes, and, though some foresters later mistakenly understood the bent live-oak morphology prevalent in the mid-island flats to be a response to wind, larger woody plants often twisted away from the shore to minimize salt spray. Live oak-pine-cedar stands with wax myrtle and yaupon holly characterized the sporadic forests found along the banks, often resting in elevated areas on ancient dunes around the most stable areas of the outer banks.¹⁹

The barrier landscape was far from uniform, narrowing in places to about a quarter mile, and reaching its broadest mass of over three miles in width at Cape Hatteras. Dense wooded areas, on which human settlement depended, were possible only where the islands were wide or elevated enough to avoid salt spray and stable enough to form an adequate

¹⁹ Carl John Burke, *A Floristic Study of the Outer Banks of North Carolina*, Unpublished Dissertation, (University North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Ph.D. 1961, Botany), 12; Brown, *Vegetation of the Outer Banks*, 14-15, 38; Dirk Frankenberg, *The Nature of the Outer Banks: Environmental Processes, Field Sites, and Development, Corolla to Ocracoke*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 25-38.

humus layer to support stands of trees. Not all barrier lands were equal. While the majority of the outer banks consisted of what are called “simple overwash” barriers that moved westward with the rising sea, certain sections, what are known as “complex barriers,” actually accumulated in place to create wide, relatively stable forested areas, some of them hosting freshwater ponds. It was not coincidence that human settlements on the banks have mostly been limited to these spaces of stable accretion that host stands of trees: Nags Head Woods and Kitty Hawk Woods on the northern banks; on Hatteras Island, wooded areas around the Chicamacomico settlements and at Avon, the Buxton Woods along the cape, and forests around Hatteras village all sat on sections of complex barriers; and so too did the extensive wooded area around Ocracoke village.²⁰

Scattered, spotty grasses interspersed with stunted woody vegetation, which in places grew into dense thickets, and scattered dunes characterized the majority of the outer banks outside of the wooded hammocks and sound-side marshes.²¹ Indeed, “Hatteras,” a place name first applied to the northern part of what became known as Hatteras Island, is thought to be an English corruption of an Algonquian word meaning “area of sparse vegetation.”²² In places along the landscape vegetation failed entirely. Where inlets initially closed or where elevation was low enough for high tides to overrun the land, little could grow. Where hurricane winds and oceanic surges destroyed the vegetation and reshuffled the landscape, sand could accumulate into large dunes that smothered other plants and could migrate across

²⁰ Riggs, *Drowning the North Carolina Coast*, 50-52; Brown, *Vegetation of the Outer Banks*, 14-15.

²¹ Frankenberg, *Nature of the Outer Banks*, 25-38.

²² Roger L. Payne, *Place Names of the Outer Banks*, (Washington, NC: Thomas A. Williams, Publisher, 1985), 92.

the land to destroy whatever lay in their wake.²³ At times, sections of the banks were characterized by such enormous bodies of sand. In the 1850s, some visitors to the Nags Head area, which was dominated south of the woods by a series of extensive dunes, nicknamed the Carolina banks “Arabia.”²⁴ The largest dune on the US coast, Jockey’s Ridge, was just north of Nags Head. Spread out over a mile at its base and shifting between 80 to 120 feet tall, depending on the wind, Jockey’s Ridge continues to dominate the vista north of Nags Head. Where grasses could colonize the dunes, vegetation could hold the sand in place. The oldest dunes on the outer banks, between 3,000 and 4,000 years old, lie beneath the most extensive maritime forests, Buxton Woods and Nags Head Woods, which are the most stable and ecologically most complex areas along the outer banks.²⁵

On the outer banks, the massive energy of wind and water against sand converged with plant and animal modifications of the land to create a complex and variegated topography, and those forces constantly built, altered, and remade the barrier islands. Although one can posit basic functions of a barrier island system and can trace historical change, there never existed a single model for a natural condition of the outer banks. To invoke the idea of a “natural” landscape is always to make claims on the way the landscape is and what it ideally should be. Claims of restoring nature, or preserving nature, were always political. And they were culturally specific. Just as wind and water reshuffled and remade the sandy lands of the outer banks, those who came to the islands continually created and re-created the meaning of the shore.

²³ Dune formation and island elevation is discussed in Pilkey, *North Carolina Shore*, 47.

²⁴ E. C. Bruce, “Lounging in the Footprints of the Pioneers,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 20, no. 120, (May 1859), 729.

²⁵ Payne, *Place Names*, 108-109, and Dolan, *Outer Banks*, 4, 10.

CHAPTER I

Shifty Lands and Shallow Waters: Uses of the Banks to 1900

“Men cannot build houses upon sand and expect to see them stand now any more than they could in olden times.”

–Raleigh News and Observer, 20 August 1879, following a hurricane

In the winter of 1874-1875, a New England naturalist named Nathaniel Bishop journeyed past the outer banks from north to south, recording his observations and leaving one of the very few accounts of local island culture before the twentieth century. An adventuresome soul, at seventeen years of age Bishop had walked “A Thousand Miles” across Argentina and Chile, later publishing a modified travelogue of his journey as a cohesive narrative. Twenty years later, as a member of the Boston Society of Natural History and of the New York Academy of Sciences, Bishop began a new adventure. Setting out from the Gulf of St. Lawrence in a canoe, he planned on paddling to Florida. To make matters more interesting, a detail that no doubt subsequently helped him sell books, Bishop stopped in Troy, New York, on the Hudson River, and traded the wooden canoe with which he began his travels for one made of paper, heavily lacquered and weighing but fifty-eight pounds. Nathaniel Bishop became best known for his “Voyage of the Paper Canoe,” travelling nine months and 2,500 miles from Quebec to Florida, and his passage across the North Carolina sounds, hugging the outer banks, provided a snapshot of the people who called the outer banks and adjacent lands home.¹

¹ Nathaniel H. Bishop, *Voyage of the Paper Canoe: A Geographical Journey of 2500 Miles, From Quebec to the Gulf of Mexico, During the Years 1874-1875*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard, Publishers, 1878), v-vii; Nathaniel

Bishop set out in July of 1874 with some basic provisions, an assistant whom he left in New York, and a bundle of maps from the US Coastal Survey. Armed with geographic knowledge, and taking advantage of connecting rivers, the frequency of barrier landmasses, canals, and the small size of his vessel, Bishop planned on journeying entirely by land-locked waters. He arrived in Norfolk in early December. Immediately departing southward, Bishop entered Currituck Sound through the Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal, then the major highway for packet steamers between North Carolina and Virginia. The people that Bishop found as he entered into Carolina waters, bound on one side by the barrier banks and on the other by tideland flats, constructed their cultures around the exploitation of the area's natural abundance and the settlements' relative isolation. Everyone Bishop met made a living shooting birds or, south of Currituck, fishing with nets. Bishop was impressed at the generosity of the poor folk he met, whose kindness, the canoeist remarked, "was like that of old friends." Guests were a rarity, and locals frequently invited the lonely traveler into their homes for meals, a dry rest, and for conversations over the regionally popular yaupon tea, made from the leaves of a locally prevalent holly-family bush. As Bishop sat out a fierce storm during his stay at Hatteras village at the home of a fisherman, he noticed how conditioned locals were to their volatile climate. As the northerner sat terrified that the storm was submerging the island around them, his host "sat with his pretty wife by the open fireplace, as unmoved as though we were in the shelter of a mountainside, while he calmly discoursed of storms, shipwrecks, and terrible struggles for life that this lonely coast had

H. Bishop, *The pampas and Andes : A Thousand Miles' Walk Across South America*, 3rd Edition, (Boston: Lee and Shepard, Publishers, 1870); Bishop's basic biography and a brief description of his trip is provided in David Cecelski, *A Historian's Coast: Adventures in the Tidewater Past*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000), 71-72.

witnessed, which sent thrills of horror to my heart.”² Faced with dangerous shoals, swiftly flowing inlets, and sometimes violent winds, Bishop passed North Carolina safely, in part, because the local populations were used to pulling together to brave adversity, and quick to help others.

Federal and state government projects, on the other hand, made Nathaniel Bishop’s canoe trip possible and facilitated his journey in other ways. Bishop planned his route with maps made from a federal survey project. He traversed rivers and waterways that had been dredged and cleared of obstructions, and he could not have passed from Virginia to North Carolina by water, without entering the Atlantic Ocean, were it not for the presence of a fine canal, funded privately but jointly supported and promoted by the legislatures in each state that it connected. Bishop spent several days crossing upper North Carolina, and he did not always make his way to another village before night fell. He passed two nights in abandoned fishing huts on a landscape that otherwise offered only a “treeless beach . . . destitute of firewood, or natural shelter of any kind.” He also found refuge in federal spaces. After several hours of dragging his canoe over the shallow shoals on the banks side of Roanoke Sound, Bishop arrived cold and tired at the Bodie Island lighthouse keeper’s door, and there he found warm shelter. But the increasing federal presence on the banks also shaped the communities Bishop found and their response to his presence. The 1870s was a decade of great transition for people along the Carolina coast. The federal government was busy building new and larger lighthouses across the banks and expanding the Lifesaving Service, which became the economic lifeblood of several villages. The same waterways that allowed

² Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 155, 160-161, 179, 184-186, 197. The two quotes, in order, are from pages 197 and 185-186, respectively.

Bishop easy access to North Carolina from the north also allowed wildfowl and fresh fish to be efficiently shipped out, and the years that Bishop travelled coincided with a dramatic local transition toward a commercial economy. A telegraph connecting Norfolk to Hatteras, a federal project to link their installments along the barrier landscape, had been completed only recently before Bishop's trip, and many villagers along the banks learned of the strange canoeist before his arrival and anticipated a visitor. But federal interest in the North Carolina coast was spatially limited. Where improved navigation or beacons favored market exchange, governments altered the land and facilitated sea travel. But beyond Cape Fear, where the waterway narrowed and Bishop entered a maze of marshland creeks, his assistance ran out. Beyond Cape Fear, the US Coastal Survey had neglected mapping. Rounding the Cape, Bishop was afterward "travelling upon *local* knowledge, which proves usually a very uncertain guide."³

From the earliest recorded European encounters with the North Carolina coast in the 16th century, everybody who came permanently to the banks sought to modify them in their own way. Not everyone agreed on the purposes. Uses of the banks reflected distinct cultural meanings. Meanings varied not only between Indians and colonists but also among different groups within colonial and, later, state boundaries. The outer banks that Bishop witnessed were the product of both governmental projects and locals' shaping of place, each seeking to use the land in varying ways for productive purposes. Knowledge and understanding of the land diverged between local familiarity and abstract generalization, illustrated well by Bishop

³ Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 165-167, 182-183, 191, 206-207; For an informative basic overview of the transitions taking place on the outer banks during the 1870s, see Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 65-88.

and his maps. Those toiling in the sun to tend gardens, shoot wildfowl, or drag a net through the sounds had a very different perspective than those in administrative centers. Colonial and state officials were much more interested in regional commerce than the productivity of local environments, and they sought to alter the islands and their inlets in the interest of maritime trade. But by the late 19th century, federal and local purposes increasingly intertwined as governmental employment offered new ways to labor for pay. By the turn of the 20th century, between commercial markets and federal projects, islanders found ways of turning their land into productive space.

Understanding this historical transition from settlement to the period of integration into federal projects and commercial markets places the early 20th century banks cultures into perspective and illustrates the repeated difficulties governing bodies encountered in attempting to tame the land and, at times, its people. As developers and scientific experts made new claims on the outer banks in the early 20th century, this earlier period of land use and modification contextualizes those claims used to re-create the banks. This chapter thus begins with the earliest permanent settlers, the coastal Algonquian Indians, and briefly outlines the first 300 years of European-American settlement, ending with the transition to commercial markets and the expansion of federal structures along the coast. This survey of the pre-20th century period along the North Carolina coast helps to explain the different ways that locals and non-locals gradually remade North Carolina's coastal island over time; it seeks to contextualize the outer banks that Bishop saw.

There are no ideal sources for reconstructing the early banks environment, but understanding Indian uses of the banks and European perspective can be instructive. Knowledge of coastal Algonquian culture along the future North Carolina coast is also limited to archaeological evidence and the sparse accounts from Sir Walter Raleigh's colonizing expeditions between 1584 and 1590. The "Algonquian" tribes that explorers encountered were united only by similar language. Scholars later constructed that label to indicate a shared linguistic heritage, but it did not constitute shared cultures. Very diverse Indian societies inhabited the mainland coast, and they related to their environments and to each other in distinct ways. Most coastal Algonquians depended on rotational agriculture and required adequately fertile land to establish settlements. Their societies were relatively small. Thomas Harriot, who accompanied the Ralph Lane expedition to colonize Roanoke Island and explore the interior in 1586, noted that Algonquian villages were neither large nor dense. "Their townes are but small, and neere the sea coast but fewe," Harriot noted, "containing but tenne or twelve houses: some 20."⁴

Portions of the outer banks islands could support such agricultural regimes for thin populations, but moving onto sandy islands subject to the brunt of storm winds and ocean surges was undesirable and, therefore, uncommon. Instead, Algonquians used the islands primarily as a temporary base for gathering fish, hunting, and foraging. Only along the denser stretch of maritime forest behind Cape Hatteras, which provided space for farms and protection from gales, did Indians form permanent villages. It was there that the Croatoan

⁴ Regina Flannery, *An Analysis of Coastal Algonquian Culture*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1939), 5-9; Thomas Harriot, "A brief and true report of the new found land of Virginia (1588)," in *Virginia Voyages from Hakluyt*, ed. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 67; Harriot went on to say that the largest community they encountered was composed of thirty houses, but it was apparently an anomaly.

Indians made their homes. The Croatoans were well known for their remarkable loyalty and openness to the British. One of their number, Manteo, traveled to Europe and later became the first Indian to undergo an English baptism. When English colonists killed several Croatoan people whom they mistook for another tribe, Manteo convinced his brethren, after heated debate, to forgive the transgression.⁵ This level of loyalty to the newcomers and the relatively poor lands on which the Croatoan lived suggests they were perhaps a marginalized society that willingly aligned itself with a new source of local power.

European visitors had a quite different perspective about the coastal environment than did the earlier settlers. When Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe undertook the initial reconnaissance voyage for Raleigh in 1584 and landed first on the sound side of the banks, they described the landscape's productivity on European terms. Disembarking at one of the forested areas on the northern end of what was later called Hatarask Island, slightly southeast of Roanoke, Barlowe wrote that "we founde such plenty . . . that I thinke in all the world the like abundance is not to be founde: and my selfe having seene those parts of Europe that most abound, finde such difference, as were incredible to be written." Barlowe reported woods "full of Deere, Conies, Hares, and Fowle . . . in incredible abundance," as well as "the highest, the reddest Cedars of the world." It is true that Barlowe was a propagandist exaggerating claims in the interest of procuring future colonizing ventures. The abundance the Englishman reported, however, was relative to his experience. Juxtaposed against the

⁵ David S. Phelps, "The Carolina Algonkians: Archaeology and History," from *An America's Four Hundredth Anniversary Slide and Narrative Presentation*. <http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~jmack/algonqin/phelps1.htm>, (accessed 23 Sept. 2007), points 47-56; David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina, 1584-1958*, 26, also agrees that the Croatan and Hatteras Indians living in this same area of present-day Buxton Woods were the only permanent Indian inhabitants of the banks. On Roanoke Island villages were used temporarily, either as seasonal fishing camps or agricultural settlements periodically abandoned to allow the thin soil to rejuvenate.

cutover fields of his homeland, even the wooded areas of the outer banks seemed a veritable garden, teeming with game and harvestable timber.⁶

Barlowe imagined he saw natural abundance, a landscape free of human manipulation. When he and Amadas arrived, they “remained by the side of this Island two whole daies, before we sawe any people of the Countrey.” It was only on the third day that a canoe carrying three Indians arrived from the sound, and an exchange of gifts ensued. The absence of permanent settlement and the apparent lack of “improvement” outside of the Indian villages led the explorers to marvel at a land “very plentifull of fruits and other naturall increases.”⁷ Whatever Barlow actually found, he failed to understand that what he saw was not simply the “naturall increases” of the soil; it was the product of a human-manipulated landscape. In the mainland forests, Algonquians and other coastal tribes regularly burned the understory growth to reduce the fuel load and promote grasses that both attracted and increased the populations of desirable herbivorous animals, such as the abundant deer, rabbits, squirrels and “divers beasts” that Barlowe remarked.⁸

⁶ Arthur Barlowe, “Arthur Barlowe’s Narrative of the 1584 Voyage,” in *Virginia Voyages from Haluyt*, ed. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 20-25, 34-37. Cronon discusses European notions of abundance in the New World in contrast to the cutover landscapes of Europe.

⁷ Barlowe, *Virginia Voyages*,” 3.

⁸ Barlowe, *Virginia Voyages*, 2, 11. Barlowe uses the phrase “naturall increases” to refer to the fruits from soils on the mainland, but his basic attitude about natural versus human agency in cultivating what were not privately held lands can be assumed to be the same on the islands as elsewhere; Stephen Pyne remarks that the early accounts from Verrazano and Drake attest to fires along the southeastern coast of North America and asserts that the Roanoke fires were probably set by Indians in Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 144; William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 49-51. Although Cronon is referring to New England burning practices, similar successional sequences can be asserted here for southern and maritime forests, that fires promoted grasses and reduced the fuel load; Harriot, *Virginia Voyages*, 62.

It is probable that Indians burned the outer banks forests as well. After establishing the colony on Roanoke Island in 1587, the colonial governor, John White, left to apply for additional aid. Returning three years later with a provisioning expedition, White chased three different fires thinking each to be a signal from his colonists. At each he was disappointed, finding neither colonists nor any other people at all. The second fire was in the vicinity of Amadas and Barlowe's first disembarkment, at which they "found no man nor signe that any had bene there lately." The next day they saw on northern Roanoke Island "a great fire thorow the woods," but when they reached it found only "the grasses and sundry rotten trees burning about the place." A recent paleoecological study corroborates the historical evidence, concluding that burnings of what is now Nags Head Woods occurred more frequently in the pre-colonial era.⁹ Non-anthropogenic fire was probably accompanied by Algonquian modification, Indians remaking the banks woodlands with fire to suit their purposes. Whether or not that is so, Amadas and Barlowe arrived at a certain point in time on quickly changing lands. Colonists witnessed no primeval landscape, no model for a pre-human "natural" state to which the outer banks could later be returned.

Lacking regular contact with the metropole, either warfare or starvation led the Roanoke venture to fail. Nearly a century passed before Europeans again resided at Roanoke. Permanent settlement into the Albemarle region came ultimately not from the ocean to the east, but by land from the north. English colonizers gained a foothold with the establishment of Jamestown in 1607, and what became the North Carolina colony, wrote governor Gabriel

⁹ John White, "John White's Narrative of the 1590 Virginia Voyage," in *Virginia Voyages from Hakluyt*, (ed. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 124-125; D.A. Burney and L.P. Burney, "Recent Paleoecology of Nags Head Woods on the North Carolina Outer Banks," *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club*, vol. 114, no. 2 (April-June, 1987), 163. This assertion is also made by Stephen Pyne. See footnote 8 above.

Johnston in 1749, “was first settled by People from Virginia in low circumstances who moved hither for the benefit of a larger and better range for their Stocks,” beginning around the 1660s.¹⁰

The North Carolina eastern mainland into which these people in “low circumstances” migrated was the emergent part of the same gently sloping coastal plain that created the outer banks, a “land of low elevation and high water tables” dominated by broad swamps and pocosins. Into this environment, immigrants brought with them land use practices prevalent in the Virginia tidewater region. They cleared wooded areas to raise subsistence foodstuffs, mainly Indian corn and beans, and allowed domesticated livestock, especially hogs and cattle, to fend for themselves in the forests. Outside of their fence-bounded farms settlers established a commons, and this free range saved pioneers the labor of having to feed their animals, even if several fell victim to predation. Cattle thrived on the dense marsh grasses and river-bottom meadows of the Carolinas, and many witnesses marveled at the ease of raising “cattle fit for the knife all the year round.”¹¹

For the mass of poor settlers, the land and its uses were amenable to a certain type of economy. Visitor opinions about these people and their practices varied widely, reflecting their own expectations. In his well-known *History of North Carolina*, John Lawson in 1709

¹⁰ *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, vol. 4, 920; William P. Cumming, “The Earliest Permanent Settlement in Carolina. Nathaniel Batts and the Comberford Map,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 45, no. 1 (Oct. 1939), 83. Cumming notes that there is not documentary evidence of settlement in Carolina before 1660, though a map dating from 1657 shows a settlement near the mouth of the Roanoke River.

¹¹ B.J. Copeland, *The Ecology of Albemarle Sound, North Carolina: An Estuarine Profile*, (Washington, DC: US Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Biological Services, 1983), 12-13; Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 18, 25-26; James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Livestock Raising in the United States, 1607-1860*, reprint of 1942 edition published by the United States Department of Agriculture as Agricultural History Series No. 5, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc, 1973), 61-62. Quote, pp. 61, comes from a contemporary observation published in the (Virginia) *Calendar of State Papers*, published in 1889.

idealized the early settlers in the Albemarle region “Who finding mild Winters and a fertile Soil beyond Expectation, producing everything that was planted to a prodigious Increase, their Cattle, Horses, Sheep, and Swine breeding very fast, and passing the Winter without any assistance from the Planter; so that everything seemed to come by Nature, the Husbandmen living almost void of Care, and free from those Fatigues which are absolutely requisite in Winter Countries.”¹² Lawson applauded settlers’ use of the land’s natural capital to mitigate unnecessary labor. To the highbrow Virginia elite William Byrd, who conducted the survey of his colony’s border with North Carolina in 1728, the free range reflected “ill Management” of both farms and livestock. Those permitting their animals to forage in the forest rather than penning them and fattening them on corn, Byrd argued, were “Indolent Wretches” who “lose the Advantage of the Milk of their cattle, as well as their Dung.”¹³ Where Lawson saw ingenuity Byrd saw ‘lazy southerners’ not bothering to improve their land or to maximize profits.

Whether exhibiting good husbandry and farm ‘improvement’ or not, free ranging stock fostered local tensions. The lands into which colonists advanced were invariably occupied,¹⁴ and foraging cattle and hogs refused to abide by the spatial boundaries that

¹² John Lawson, *Lawson’s History of North Carolina*, reprinting of 1714 edition, first published in 1709, (Richmond, VA: Garrett and Massie, 1937), 62.

¹³ William Byrd, *William Byrd’s Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, ed. William K. Boyd, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), 54.

¹⁴ Though Indians lived throughout the Carolina mainland when settlers came in the late 17th century, North Carolina’s colonial government deliberately eliminated most coastal Indians in the early 18th century, and those that aligned with the white settlers soon afterward either succumbed to disease or integrated. From 1711 to 1713, a confederacy led by the Tuscarora Indians, protesting ill treatment by whites that included the abduction and sale of Indian women and children, took advantage of an internal colonial rebellion to wage war against the settlers. This was followed by repeated conflicts with the Coree Indians in the Core Sound area, who were finally destroyed after they seriously wounded a colonial official, the colonial board responding that “measures may and ought to be taken for the Entire Destruction of ye Said nation of Indians as if there had never been a peace made with them.” After bloody and devastating conflict, most Indian tribes opposing the white settlers

humans created. This often led to conflicts with local Indians when hogs, for instance, devoured their crops or when Indians hunted the feral pigs for food. Though he ignored these complications, Lawson noted the importance of bounding stock. For settlers trying to save their labor for clearing and cultivating the land, fences were a premium. Stock owners sought to use existing topography for their benefit where possible. "The Land," Lawson wrote, "(except in some few places,) being dry and high Banks, parceled out into most convenient Necks, (by the creeks,) easy to be fenced in for securing their Stocks to more strict Boundaries, whereby, with a small trouble of fencing, almost every man may enjoy, to himself, an entire Plantation, or rather Park." Even large streams would not necessarily prevent animals from swimming across, but they formed a useful barrier. The innovation was important. During most of the colonial period, farmers primarily measured wealth in heads of cattle. While losing a few calves to wolves might have been assumed, unfortunate was the farmer whose stock annually diminished. Both to prevent the predation of livestock, whether by hungry wolves or hungry people, and to avoid the labor-intensive task of building fences, colonists in New England and Virginia alike commonly used offshore islands or peninsulas as grazing lands. In such a way, the outer banks islands were first settled more by cattle than by people, containing large herds belonging to relatively few owners.¹⁵

were decimated by 1715; others were merely impoverished. These early conflicts, along with invasive diseases that had long ravaged native populations, left the coastal tribes with little power, and they soon ceased to be a major concern of colonial officials. By 1763, an itinerant minister named Alexander Stewart could report that "the remains of the Attamuskeet, Roanoke and Hatteras Indians, live mostly along [the Hyde County mainland] coast, mixed with the white inhabitants, many of these attended at the Places of Public Worship, while I was there and behaved with decency[,] seemed desirous of instruction and offered themselves and their children to me for baptism." According to his account, Stewart baptized a total of 21 people, mostly children, between these tribes.

¹⁵ Lawson, *History of North Carolina*, 81. Ralph H. Brown, *Historical Geography of the United States*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1948), 31-33. Brown's account of the Rhode Island stock breeding in Narragansett Bay shows the use of islands in New England. An account of the abundance of livestock on Long

Unlike New England, owners of banks livestock interested themselves more in easy returns on their labor than cultivating superior breeds, such as the renowned horses of Narragansett Bay. Strategies for making the banks pay extended from local cultural norms. When William Byrd visited the tidewater lands bordering North Carolina and Virginia and witnessed white settlers' apparent proclivities against improvement, he complained that the men lacked the industriousness that marked good character, making them "just like the Lazy Indians." Byrd's statement reveals a great deal of social bias, but he also had a point. Unable to fully subdue the land to axe and plow, subsistence practices in the Albemarle low country were not at first radically different from those of Indians. Along with pork, settlers added Indian corn and beans as the basic staples of diet. They also adopted Native fire culture practices to make the forests more amenable to ranging stock and deer. Like their early neighbors, the majority of settlers took advantage of the landscape as it was and cultivated areas in limited ways to suit their purposes.

Using the outer banks as cattle country was consistent with these practices. The barrier islands bounding the coast were unlike New England or Virginian tidewater forests. They could not be transformed into productive farmlands supporting large human populations, but they could be filled with cattle left to fend for themselves in an expansive commons. Cattle grazed mostly on the dense marsh grasses bordering the sounds but also cropped the inter-dune meadows and foraged in maritime forests; by the eighteenth century

Island during the mid-1600s is provided in Lyman Carrier, *The Beginnings of Agriculture in America*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1923), 156; This use of islands for livestock is also corroborated in Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 61, 131,149. Cronon additionally recounts the numerous problematic relationships between colonists and Indians caused by fences and ranging livestock in his chapter "Bounding the Land," especially pp. 127-141; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 23.

herds roamed across a landscape thick with salty wind, sand, and grasses, but thin of people.¹⁶

Europeans settled on the northern banks not long after a royal charter created the Carolina colony in 1663, distributing the land to a few Lords Proprietors. One of the Lords, Sir John Colleton, claimed Collington Island, and he settled the island by proxy in 1664 when his agent, Captain John Whittie, cleared a farm, planted corn, and turned cattle loose to graze. Collington Island sat behind the banks proper, but it was part of the barrier landmass, forming the southern edge of Kitty Hawk Bay. Set back from the ocean and nicely forested, Collington was perhaps the most productive section of the banks, and Whittie's farm marks the first permanent settlement on the islands. Early settlement north and south of Collington is much less clear.¹⁷

Europeans first colonized the barrier shore in scattered settlements along the northern banks down to present-day Nags Head, below which Roanoke Inlet separated the islands. South of Roanoke Inlet a few landowners bought up large tracts, dividing nearly the entire outer banks between nine people by the early 1700s. Much of the actual habitation, however, resulted from poor squatters seeking a place to eke out a living by establishing subsistence farms. Invariably, banks pioneers cleared farm settlements in wooded hammocks on the sound side of the islands. The live oak-pine-cedar forests were the most stable areas of the islands, and after a century or more of vegetative decay and regeneration they created a thin but fertile humus layer adequate to support a modest vegetable garden that islanders fenced off to protect their vegetables from wandering stock. Among other basic vegetables, settlers

¹⁶ Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 54; Kirby, *Poquosin*, 7, 18-19; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 22-25.

¹⁷ *Colonial Records*, vol. 1, 54-55; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 22-25.

most commonly grew sweet potatoes, for which, according to an anonymous traveler around 1810, the barrier island land “appears to be peculiarly well adapted.”¹⁸ Faced with the oceanic winds, Islanders could clear only small plots. Trees provided protection from gales blowing in off the coast, and this was important both to protect people and to avoid soil erosion. In his visit to the banks in the 1850s, the famous agronomist Edmund Ruffin noted that a farmer on Collington Island anomalously grew 2,000 to 2,500 bushels of corn. Mr. Gallop, the proprietor, ruined another part of his property after clearing it of trees. Ruffin noted that this land, “which he formerly knew when under good forest growth, since he has cleared and cultivated it, has been blown off from depths varying from two to five feet.”¹⁹ Those experimenting with farming the banks grew acutely sensitive to the threat of landscape devastation from overzealous clearing. Successful inhabitation of the banks meant modest manipulation and a great deal of adapting to the island climate and morphology.

The availability of adequately forested areas determined where people could settle, and settlement location reveals a great deal about forest distribution on the banks. Unfortunately, there are very few detailed accounts either of settlements or of the landscape. Jonathan Price surveyed Ocracoke Inlet in 1795 and provided the first documented glimpse

¹⁸ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 23-25, 32-33; The anonymous visitor referred to Portsmouth around 1810 and the account was reprinted in A.R. Newsome, ed., “A Miscellany from the Thomas Henderson Letter Book, 1810-1811,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Oct. 1926), 401; The assertions made here concerning farming practices on the banks are consistent with Edmund Ruffin’s observation in the Wash Woods area in northern Currituck that “They cultivate small patches of Indian corn and sweet potatoes. For the latter, the soil is particularly well adapted, and they can be there raised in any quantities,” in *Agricultural, Geological, and Descriptive Sketches of Lower North Carolina and the Similar Adjacent Lands*, (Raleigh: Institution for the Deaf & Dumb & the Blind, 1861), 127. Ruffin also noted sweet potatoes prevalent on Roanoke Island; There are several references to pirates taking refuge along the North Carolina shore during the 1690s and runaways are mentioned in the Colonial Records, but the only specific reference to the banks is one in which the runaways were helped by a banks resident but thought to be long gone, found in *Colonial Records*, vol. 1, 514. At any rate, these would have been fleeting instances, and the emphasis here is on general patterns of land use.

¹⁹ Ruffin, *Sketches of Lower North Carolina*, 127-130.

of the vegetative cover of the banks between Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke Inlet. Surprisingly, Price described conditions in terms that would be familiar to visitors one hundred or two hundred years later, minus Hatteras Inlet. “Cape-Hatteras and the land from it towards Occacock, to the distance of about thirteen miles, are covered with large evergreen trees, such as live oak, pine and cedar,” Price explained, “The coast afterward is bald beach, intersperced [*sic*] with a few low sand hills,” until arriving at forest along the southern extremity of the island, around the village of Ocracoke. At least within the area Price described, opportunities for settlement were little different from what they would have been much later. Early maps suggest a similar context for the rest of the banks, with forests prominent in all of the areas where villages later formed. By the end of the colonial period, islanders established small scattered settlements in similar areas along Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands where villages existed in the twentieth century.²⁰

Along with wood, potable water was also a limited resource on the islands. As Dirk Frankenberg wrote recently, “Everyone on the Outer Banks drinks [and always drank] rainwater.” When rain seeps into the barrier island soil, it is suspended above a continuous layer of saltwater in what is called a perched water table. Fresh water is slightly less dense than salt water, and a convex lens forms where the two meet, keeping the rain water available just below the surface. Edmund Ruffin noted what other observers confirmed and locals much

²⁰ Old Hatteras Inlet closed by the 1760s and the present-day Hatteras Inlet opened in 1846. There was, therefore, a contiguous landmass between Buxton Woods and Ocracoke village when Prince observed the area in 1795. Price’s account was reprinted in 1926. Jonathan Price, “A Description of Occacock Inlet,” reprinted in *North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1926), 626. Dunbar, *Geographical History*, 24, 134-135. Dunbar use cartographic evidence to point out that settlements along Hatteras were relatively unchanging, though they may have shifted north or south as conditions dictated. Dunbar also engages with evidence used by Charles Porter in 1938 to argue for unbroken forests along the banks, and that will be dealt with in a later chapter.

later complained of: “Water that is fresh, but badly flavored, may be found anywhere . . . by digging from two to six feet deep.” By digging shallow wells, the banks made water available for drinking and satiating thirsty crops. The uses to which water could be put and its availability was nevertheless constrained by the source. Even moving small quantities of freshwater required a great deal of human labor, and the water did not always remain fresh. The water table rose and fell with ocean tides, and during storm surges saltwater could cover the fresh water supply, creating brackish water near the surface. Living with the banks meant learning how to cope with its limits.²¹

Islanders, whom outsiders collectively called “Bankers,” supplemented the land’s productivity with walks to the beach, where they took advantage of others’ tragedies. Whales occasionally washed ashore, and the colonial government awarded a special license for claiming rights to the misfortunate animals as early as 1694. Sailors also came to dread the outer banks as a place notorious for beaching vessels during heavy storms, and remnants of wreckage often littered the shore even through the first half of the twentieth century. Islanders were reportedly hospitable to wreck victims but also opportunistic, reaping the spoils of maritime tragedy. Wrecked ships were an especially important source of usable wood, a limited resource on the islands, and whatever booty the ship carried could earn the land pirates some rare commodities in trade. With wrecks as with beached whales, colonial

²¹ Dirk Frankenberg, *The Nature of the Outer Banks: Environmental Processes, Field Sites, and Development Issues, Corolla to Ocracoke*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 127-129; Ruffin, *Sketches of Lower North Carolina*, 133; Ruffin’s observation is corroborated by Nathaniel Bishop’s experience in *Paper Canoe*, 192.

officials regulated the spoils by 1678, but in practice earliest arrival often determined property rights.²²

Islanders oriented their modest societies toward the sounds where wildfowl were thick for the shooting and where plentiful fish could be harvested either for the table or, to a lesser extent, salted and traded. The sounds isolated the islands from the mainland, but the same water that separated inhabitants also connected them. Between the tidelands and the banks, villagers in the eighteenth century traded regularly. Vessels plying North Carolina waters were necessarily of the shallow draft variety, and until the Civil War most waterborne craft were limited to rowboats, canoes, and what they called perriaugers, the latter being a dugout canoe split down the middle and widened with an additional flat bottom section. Canoes were most common for local travel, but perriaugers were quite useful for carrying goods. A large one could be equipped with a mast and sail and, as one historian noted, “could carry as much as 100 barrels of pitch or tar,” or other goods such as cattle, horses, or foodstuffs. These boats facilitated local trading networks.²³ To engage in trade was to negotiate the water, and islanders quickly became skilled watermen.

Beginning as early as 1728, but more commonly by the late eighteenth century, banks settlers constructed windmills to grind corn. Taking advantage of one of the elements the

²² *Colonial Records*, vol. 1, 419. An interesting account of a dispute over rights to a beached whale is recounted here in which Mathias Towler, who was granted a license by the governor to recover whales, found some people after several days of boiling the blubber and filling barrels of oil, only to claim the whale. A dispute ensued when these individuals who had spent days of work preparing the animal wanted compensation for their labor; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 22-24, 75-77. Stick found that on the Collington Island “plantation” started by John Whittie, whale oil was the only profitable commodity.

²³ F. W. Clonts, “Travel and Transportation in Colonial North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1926), 20. Perriaugers were elsewhere known as “pirogues.” Clonts also mentions the use of larger boats called sloops, but these were not owned by small planters such as those inhabiting the banks; Quote from Charles Christopher Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina, 1763-1789*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 16.

islands had in plenty, windmills along the banks also signified connections with the mainland. Corn was a major crop in the coastal plains subsistence regimen along with beans and pork, and the outer banks soil was ill-suited to grow adequate quantities of corn; often none at all. Over the eighteenth century, islanders made up for this deficit by establishing regular trade with the mainland coast, trading their salted mullet or yaupon tea for corn. Yaupon was a shrub native to the banks, and coastal Algonquians brewed yaupon and drank it as a purgative, a use indicated in its scientific name *Ilex vomitoria*. Europeans learned use of the plant from their early neighbors but enjoyed a weaker version as a regional tea, which became a prominent cultural feature of the North Carolina coast. The reciprocal end of this coastal trade was, on the banks, represented by the windmills. Nearly all of the mills were “post mills,” which could be pivoted to face the direction of the prevailing wind, and the sails could be adjusted to the force of the wind to ensure optimal grinding.²⁴ After mills became common along the outer banks in the late eighteenth century, even small communities constructed them by the mid-1800s. An occupying Union Soldier witnessing the North Carolina coast in the 1860s remarked that “There are a greater number [of windmills along this coast] than I supposed were in existence in the whole country.” A few decades later, visitors would not have made such statements. As alternative forms of employment gained

²⁴ Tucker Littleton, “When Windmills Whirled on the Tar Heel Coast,” *The State*, (Oct. 1980), 9-11; Lawson mentions Indian uses of yaupon in Lawson, *History of North Carolina*, 234-235; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 32-35; For references to early agriculture, see note 14 above. Ruffin, pp.127, does mention one instance of “small patches of Indian corn and sweet potatoes” being grown in the Wash Woods area, and corn was planted in quantity on Colington Island. Roanoke Island, according to Ruffin, pp. 129, was suitable to grow “potatoes and garden vegetables.” The majority of settlements would not have engaged in trade as they did if they could grow adequate quantities of corn.

prominence and foodstuffs became more easily accessible following the Civil War, local mills fell into disuse, leaving only a couple remnants by 1900.²⁵

By facilitating trade with mainland villages, islanders used mills to expand the islands' productivity and mitigate the basic problem of limited island food sources. By allowing animals to freely graze on landscapes that were otherwise unproductive, locals expanded the usable food sources that the land provided. Cultivating the land created a particular relationship to the banks. Those constructing mills, cultivating garden plots, grazing stock, and digging wells cared deeply about the bounty one could wrest from the land; their lives depended on adequate returns. For islanders, experiences and memories lent meaning to the topography that surrounded them. Particular spaces mattered.

This view from the banks, the banks as home, was not the only way of seeing or using the islands. Alternatively, those in administrative centers, colonial and then state officials, were forced to confront the banks and their shifting inlets as major obstacles to trade. Viewing the banks through the state, North Carolina was blessed with extensive internal water highways, but no efficient way to connect to larger markets. Nor with the extensive and shallow marshland flats behind the islands could anyone establish harbors near the inlets. The banks, in other words, were in the way. Unlike those coming to terms with a particular place, seen from the state the islands were abstract entities to be manipulated in various ways in the interest of trade or to serve political ends.

Administrative agents concerned themselves primarily with revenue and commerce. They cared little about the actual condition of settlers along the banks, and the people that

²⁵ The Union Soldier quoted here is Charles F. Johnson in a published memoir, *The Long Roll*, (East Aurora, NY: The Roycrofters, 1911), 53-54; Littleton, "When Windmills Whirled," 9.

settled the islands remained obscure and clumped together under the umbrella term “Bankers.”²⁶ A cursory examination of the colonial and state records suggests official priorities. Turning to the records index under the heading “Bankers,” officials made reference to the settlers only in three instances when they “attack privateers, plunder [a] wrecked Spanish ship,” or “rob a vessel.” In 1750, Colonial Governor Gabriel Johnston wrote an account of the recent war with Spain and referred to an incident involving “Bankers,” whom he described as “a set of People who live on certain sandy islands lying between the Sound and the Ocean, and who are very Wild and ungovernable, so that it is seldom possible to Execute any Civil or Criminal Writs among them.”²⁷ The governor revealed a great deal about settlements on the coast: islanders were isolated and, as a result, formed largely independent communities with only tenuous connections to centralized authority. Banks settlers evolved a particular culture based on their isolated geography and limited local resources, which often put them at odds with mainlanders more integrated into colonial and world markets.

The key connection between the mainland and the banks was shipping. Much more than particular places, colonial administrators at the capital of New Bern worried about the problems barrier islands posed to trade. Blessed with rich estuaries and abundant inland waterways, most North Carolina settlements, including the colonial capital, were located in

²⁶ I avoid the term “Banker,” even though it was a common designation as early as the 1700s and does describe what evolved into a shared cultural trait, because the blanket term, though replaced here by other generalized terms like “islander” and “banks residents,” belies the way that villagers thought about themselves. This problem will be further explored in the following chapter.

²⁷ *State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 23, 40; Stephen B. Weeks, ed., *Index to the Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, 84; *Colonial Records*, vol. 4, 1306. Johnston was explaining decisions for dealing with a wrecked Spanish vessel on the banks after England signed peace with Spain. He was making an excuse for and separating himself from the actions of banks residents who, it was feared, would plunder the ship, though in fact the Spanish had ravished the banks and stole a great deal of livestock only three years previously.

the northern section bounded by the outer banks. Colonial officials complained often that a “defect of this Province is the defenceless [*sic*] state of the Sea Coast [for lack of harbors], and the want of a sufficient depth of water for large Ships to carry away lumber and naval stores from the Northern parts of this Colony.” The “want of a sufficient depth of water” referred both to the shallowness of the sounds and rivers and to the troublesome inlets. Vessels burdened with heavy cargo could not safely navigate these waters, and it became standard practice to unload goods onto smaller ships before crossing the inlets, a process known as “lightering,” which made competitive trade burdensome at best and facilitated smuggling. Indeed pirates, including the infamous Blackbeard, frequented the banks from 1713 to 1718, taking advantage of these restrictive trading lanes.²⁸

Inlets, the greatest impediment to travel, shoaled up to create large deltas of sand on the sound side, leaving only narrow channels through which ships could safely pass. The high level of particular knowledge needed to successfully navigate a moderately deep inlet was well illustrated by John Lawson’s detailed instructions for passage through Hatteras Inlet in the early 1800s:

As you come into the Inlet keep close to the South Breakers, till you are over the Bar, where you will have two Fathom at Low-Water. You may come to an Anchor in two Fathom and a Half when you are over, then steer over close aboard the North-Shoar, where is four Fathom close to a Point of Marsh; then stir up the Sound a long League, till you bring the North-Cape of the Inlet to bear S. S. E. half E., then steer W. N. W., the East-point of Bluff-Land at Hatteras bearing E. N. E. the Southernmost large Hammock towards Ocacock, bearing S. S. W. half S. then you are in the Sound, over the Bar of Sand, whereon is but six Foot Water; then your Course to Pampticough (Pamlico) is almost West.²⁹

²⁸ *Colonial Records*, vol. 6, 1027; Crittenden, *Commerce of North Carolina*, 4-6; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 28.

²⁹ Lawson, *History of North Carolina*, 64.

Any deviation from these exact descriptions promised disaster. To ensure the shipping on which planters in tidewater North Carolina depended, New Bern officials employed pilots with the local knowledge necessary to guide ships through the inlets. Pilots were to mark these channels through the shifting shoals and to guide ships across for a fee, an ancient and low-tech method to abate the difficulty of travel by relying on specialized human knowledge rather than mechanical manipulation.

Pilots with direct ties to New Bern colonized the outer banks for purposes entirely different from subsistence farmers. The colony needed navigational aids, and pilots constructed separate communities based on the taxable trade lane of Ocracoke Inlet. After passing “An Act for Settling and Maintaining Pilots at Roanoke and Ocacock Inlett[s]” in 1715, officials tried for two decades to organize pilots for Roanoke, Ocracoke, and later Currituck Inlets. Ocracoke, however, proved the only lasting channel of passage. In 1731, one official complained that “Curratuck Inlett is shut up and Roanock is so dangerous that few people care to use it but go round to Ocacock.” Ocracoke Inlet remained the primary inlet highway until the mid-1800s, when Hatteras Inlet became prominent, and then resumed the role about fifty years later. In 1734, pilots installed near the inlet founded Ocracoke Village, known early on as Pilot Town. Across from Ocracoke, on the south side of the inlet, the colonial government created a second settlement, Portsmouth, in 1753 following war with Spain. Officials sought there to protect the inlet by raising a fort, which they probably never completed, and intended the town, as the name suggests, to become an important port, which it never achieved. Portsmouth, however, eventually hosted pilots and grew into a successful settlement on the scale of Ocracoke. Together these were the only villages-sized settlements

along the banks by the time of American independence, home to nearly two hundred inhabitants each.³⁰ Portsmouth's success, despite failing its creators, revealed a basic economic trend: villages near inlets (a proximity that could change over time) realized much greater commercial advantages than those in the middle of the long islands. At inlets water connected the interior to the outside, and those living near these passageways took advantage of those connections.

Ocracoke and Portsmouth were the only communities on the outer banks where proprietors kept significant numbers of slaves. In the coastal settlements along North Carolina's maritime fringe, racial boundaries were much less rigid than was prevalent on mainland plantations, though they were far from absent. Ocracokers and Portsmouth Islanders commonly held slaves and employed free blacks as pilots, but the coastal communities casually challenged strict racial hierarchies, including those involving sexual relations. Ocracoke Inlet pilots did not conceal black consorts, often freed bonded lovers, and usually recognized and sometimes deeded substantial tracts of land to mixed offspring. People of African descent, both slave and free, became skilled watermen and were often afforded more freedom and better treatment than elsewhere, but they were not equals. Following the Civil War, most of them left the islands and only a few non-whites remained at Ocracoke. On Roanoke Island, the US army established a freedman's colony during the war

³⁰ *State Records* vol. 23, 40; One George Thompson was appointed pilot of Roanoke Island in 1715, see *Colonial Records*, vol. 2, 200; Pilots were approved for Currituck Inlet in 1726 but may never have been appointed as the inlet closed shortly thereafter, see *Colonial Records*, vol. 2, 611; Ocracoke was deemed the only usable inlet in 1731 in *Colonial Records*, vol. 3, 210; There is no evidence that any pilot was appointed to Ocracoke inlet until Captain Miles Gale took up the position in 1734, *Colonial Records*, vol. 3, 638; In 1795, Jonathan Price noted of the inhabitants of Ocracoke, pp.625, "They are all pilots; and their number of head of families is about thirty." Price also claimed that there was no dwelling on Portsmouth, though evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Gary Dunbar does an excellent job of analyzing this evidence and estimates that Portsmouth must have had about the same number of inhabitants in 1795 as in 1800, when the census recorded 221 people, including 79 slaves. Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 24, 133.

which at its height held a population of 3,100 former slaves given one-acre plots, but the land was withdrawn after the war and only a few dozen freedmen stayed on the island. A handful of minority black residents remained on the registers in these island communities, but by the early 20th century the outer banks villagers were almost exclusively white.³¹

Despite their different purposes, Islanders and the government that claimed control over their lands could certainly agree on one thing: the outer banks were a buffer landscape. The difference lay in what this designation meant to either party. For mainland settlers, the outer banks were a mixed blessing. A terrible obstacle to maritime trade, the banks chain, it was also noted, “defends [the upper North Carolina mainland] from the Violence and Insults of the Atlantic Ocean; by which Barrier a vast sound is hemmed in, which fronts the Mouths of Navigable and Pleasant Rivers of this Fertile Country.”³² The banks, in other words, shaped the mainland environment, not only by establishing rich coastal waterways and facilitating inland travel, but also acting as a buffer to extreme storms, tempering the impact of hurricanes or northeasters crashing across the southeastern seaboard. Storms, however, were not the only violence from the Atlantic, and the difficulty of passage as well as the facility of smuggling into North Carolina that were regularly decried in time of peace proved indispensable in time of war, at least until Union soldiers overran the coast in 1861-1862.

³¹ David Cecelski discusses relations between white islanders and blacks, particularly at Ocracoke Inlet in *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 50-5, 140-141; Horace James, “The Contraband Colony, 1864,” in *An Outer Banks Reader*, ed. David Stick, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 263-272, discusses the Roanoke Island freedman's colony. James was a minister in charge of the colony during the war and describes its evolution in detail; Census records before 1870 do not break down eastern North Carolina beyond the county level, so it is difficult to say how many slaves Ocracoke held. Portsmouth is an exception is listed as having 122 slaves in 1850, which was probably comparable to Ocracoke. By 1870, Portsmouth had 6 black residents, Nags Head 17, Hatteras included Frisco and Buxton and had the largest population with 26, Kinnakeet included Chicamacomico and had 4, and Ocracoke had 7 black residents. By 1930, Ocracoke had 11 black residents, reportedly belonging to one family, Kinnakeet had 1 and Hatteras had 1.

³² Lawson, *History of North Carolina*, 61.

Alternatively, then, during periodic onslaughts from violent storms or from violent people, living on buffer lands was unfortunate indeed. Those catastrophes caused by people often exacerbated rifts between banks inhabitants and state officials. It was in the context of the peace agreement following the War of Austrian Succession, mainly with Spain, that Governor Johnston declared bankers “Wild and ungovernable.”³³ Livestock roaming the banks proved a boon to the plundering Spanish, and later military strategists sought to avoid provisioning invading navies by eliminating the stock before it could be foraged. Discussing military options in 1776, one official pointed out that “the sea coast from the Virginia Line to . . . the South Carolina line, is totally defenceless [*sic*], and all the sea banks covered with cattle, sheep and hogs, and the few inhabitants living on the banks are chiefly persons whose estates consist in live stock, and exposed to the ravages of the small armed vessels . . . [which, if they could be] prevented from getting supplies of fresh provisions from the sea coast, it will be impossible for the war to be of long continuation in this Province.”³⁴ Along Core Banks, home to great numbers of stock and the single settlement of Portsmouth, officials ordered Captain John Nelson of the Craven Militia in 1777 to “do your best to endeavor . . . by all means to remove the Stocks of Cattle and Sheep so as at every event to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.” Whichever party removed the livestock from these lands of limited food sources, it was the locals who would suffer. Though the treacherous geography of the coast prevented a full British blockade during the war for

³³ *Colonial Records*, vol. 4, 1306. Johnston wrote in 1750, two years after the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle ended the War of Austrian Succession, which lasted from 1740-1748 (the American theater of which was also called King George’s War). This war was an enlargement of an ongoing war with Spain, begun as the so-called War of Jenkins Ear, 1739-1742.

³⁴ *Colonial Records*, vol. 10, 526; for an account of Spanish plundering in the 1740s, see *Colonial Records*, vol. 4, 1306.

independence, efforts to remove the stock failed and British troops regularly raided the islands.³⁵

During the Revolutionary and then the Civil War, bankers openly resisted marching orders from the capital, exposing rifts between locals and the state. Residents of the northern banks and Hatteras Island successfully petitioned officials in New Bern in 1778 to avoid militia service, complaining that “the coast is much infested at this time with the enemy which are constantly landing men and plundering . . . [and had] also killed several cattle,” leaving residents in a state of starvation.³⁶ Following an effective occupation by Union forces during the American Civil War over 80 years later, on September of 1861 Second Lieutenant Francis Farquhar reported that “there are many beeves, hogs, and sheep on the island (Hatteras). All of the inhabitants that I conversed with unite in complaining of the vandalism of our troops.” By October, Hatteras villagers pledged open loyalty to the Union. Reverend Marble Nash Taylor led the call for peace, reportedly pleading with the soldiers that islanders were “a poor race, living principally by fishing and gathering yoakum (yaupon), an evergreen of spontaneous growth, which they dried and exchanged for corn.” Nash also headed a proposal to establish a separate state government at Hatteras, an overture that President Lincoln quickly rejected but which did not hurt locals’ immediate goal of replenishing food supplies following battles of a war in which many of them, probably most, were

³⁵ *State Records*, vol. 11, 775; In 1779, the “Bankers” got revenge on British military plundering when they “were concealed amongst the Hills, but had not the patience to wait their coming up, rushed down upon them, killed five and took their muskets and several other articles they left behind, which sold amongst themselves for eight or nine hundred dollars.” see *State Records*, vol. 14, 139.

³⁶ *State Records*, vol. 13, 285; *State Records*, vol. 22, 939. The request was written by a third party representing the “Bankers.” Islanders outside of the pilot towns of Ocracoke and Portsmouth were probably illiterate.

disinterested.³⁷ From early settlement through the 19th century, wars on the North Carolina coast fostered the starkest contrast between the view from the state and the view from the banks; little wonder then that islanders' loyalty to centers of organized authority proved rather malleable.

The consistency of wartime problems belied the constancy of change. Over the eighteenth century, banks settlements became more organized, trade networks regularized, pilots established, and Ocracoke and Portsmouth turned into thriving villages. Economic and social changes over the nineteenth century, especially after the Civil War, were much more revolutionary than the gaining of political independence from Britain, and much of what transformed banks culture and economic relations reverberated from developments elsewhere. Projects, both North Carolinian and federal, to facilitate navigation incrementally connected the banks to larger markets and to state prerogatives.

Following political independence, the young state of North Carolina quickly moved to facilitate commerce by supplementing human aids to navigation with mechanical ones. The first project aimed to construct two lighthouses, one on Bald Head Island at the mouth of the Cape Fear River leading to Wilmington, the state's one ocean-accessible port, and another on Ocracoke Island near the inlet. Before the first could be completed or the second initiated, however, Congress endorsed Federalist policies of promoting national mercantilism, passing legislation on August 7, 1789 that placed responsibility for

³⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Ser. 1, vol. 4 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), 592; Evert A Duyckinck, *National History of the War For the Union*, vol. 1, (New York: Johnson, Fry and Company, 1861), 553-554.

lighthouses, beacons and buoys in federal control and declaring that all lands on which lighthouses sat would be federal property. The Bald Head Island lighthouse stalled and was finally finished in 1795. At Ocracoke, where the purpose of the lighthouse was to provide a reference point for the inlet channels rather than to avoid the shoals of a cape, planners changed the location in 1794 to a tiny island made of oyster shells inside the inlet on the sound side, and they completed a fifty-five-foot wooden lighthouse by 1803. The same legislation enacting the Ocracoke Inlet lighthouse also approved a beacon at probably the most dangerous cape along the US Atlantic coast, Cape Hatteras, where contractors finished a ninety-foot sandstone lighthouse by 1802. Construction of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse marked the first federal possession on the outer banks islands and heralded future developments. Lighthouses at Cape Lookout in 1812, on the Ocracoke mainland in 1823 after a storm destroyed the former lighthouse, and at Bodie Island near Wimble Shoals in 1837 added to federal territory. Lighthouse keepers often migrated from elsewhere to man the lights, but they nevertheless received a regular government check, bringing some cash to what, outside of Ocracoke, were largely barter-oriented communities.³⁸

In addition to lighthouses, Congress also improved navigation by stationing light vessels moored into place near the banks. In 1824 the first lightboat serviced the offshore coast at Diamond Shoals extending out from Cape Hatteras. The Hatteras light ship was an unfortunate and isolated post, subjecting the captain and crew to severe storms that caused the ship to lose its mooring several times before finally breaking loose and crashing against the banks after less than two-and-one-half years of service. Ships moored behind the banks

³⁸ David Stick, *North Carolina Lighthouses*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1980), 11-24, 43.

fared much better. Placed in the sound waters between 1824 and 1836, nine lightships effectively marked out safe shipping routes from Ocracoke Inlet into Pamlico Sound, and branched off into Core Sound, Albemarle Sound, and the Neuse and Pamlico River estuaries. Though mariners often complained of the inadequate size of the lighthouses, by the time North Carolina delegates debated the desirability of secession, beacons and ships mapped out the state's coastal waters day and night by a string of lights, all established and maintained at national public expense.³⁹

Lighthouses and lightships could only clarify geographic position, and navigational problems associated with the banks continued. North Carolina commerce continued regularly to traverse Ocracoke Inlet through the first half of the nineteenth century, and the destination made this problematic. Some of North Carolina's freight went south to Charleston. A majority, however, was destined for the great port cities to the north, especially Baltimore and New York. Thus, once a ship steered clear of the inlet shoals at Ocracoke, one still had to negotiate Diamond shoals extending out from Cape Hatteras and the turbulent waters and winds that rendered passage perilous. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, efforts abounded at internal waterway improvements intended to abate this difficulty.

Most importantly, the state incorporated companies to construct canals. The Dismal Swamp Canal Company, incorporated in 1790, aimed to connect the Albemarle Sound and Chesapeake Bay, thereby permitting direct passage to the small port city of Norfolk and avoiding Ocracoke altogether. Constructed from the back-breaking physical labor of human

³⁹ Stick, *Lighthouses*, 25-32.

chattel, with one crew starting in Virginia and the other in North Carolina, they slowly forged an inadequate canal that was not fully serviceable until 1828. Upon the Dismal Swamp Canal's completion a full 90% of Norfolk's trade came from North Carolina waters, becoming the most convenient and useful port for those trading lumber, shingles, turpentine, tar, and fish from the Albemarle tideland. The Dismal Swamp Canal nevertheless remained inadequately deep and too narrow for major commercial trade. Seeking an alternative, a group of Virginians followed by North Carolinian boosters built the Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal in the 1850s east of the Dismal Swamp. The Chesapeake and Albemarle soon became a major trading lane, overshadowing the Dismal Swamp Canal, diverting a great deal of traffic from Ocracoke throughout the late nineteenth century, and tying Albemarle industries even tighter to Norfolk.⁴⁰

One historian noted of Virginia's southern port that "Despite its magnificent harbor, Norfolk did not ship produce to Europe or the West Indies but still sent it in coasting vessels to Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston."⁴¹ But if Norfolk was peripheral to greater eastern ports, North Carolina was backcountry to the backcountry. Many at the new state capital at Raleigh made this point forcibly, and nobody more so than Archibald Murphey. Murphey was a great advocate of internal improvements in the early 19th century, and because North Carolina was "unquestionably humiliated by being under the necessity of seeking Ships at Norfolk," he sought primarily to establish a series of ports along his state's coast. The lack of internal improvements, Murphey argued, promoted stagnant agriculture

⁴⁰ Clifford Reginald Hinshaw, Jr., "North Carolina Canals Before 1860," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Jan. 1948), 6-8, 13-29, 41-53; Thomas C. Parramore with Peter C. Stewart and Tommy L. Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 147-150, 158-160.

⁴¹ Parramore, *Norfolk*, 160.

and mass westward migrations of what he considered cultured North Carolinians. Echoing Jeffersonian ideals, Murphey wrote in 1815 that “This perversion of things is gradually undermining our morality, and converting the character which we bore of being industrious, enterprising farmers and thriving mechanics, into that of shopkeepers and speculators.” Promoting canals, clearing obstructions in rivers, and most importantly creating ports and markets along the coast rather than relying on Norfolk or Charleston would allow North Carolina and North Carolinians to realize their potential. And Murphey left little question as to where responsibility for such enterprises lay: “Individual capital is insufficient to effect [*sic*] any of those great objects. They require the resources of the State.”⁴²

Of three ports that Murphey wished to build, he anticipated locating one at Roanoke Island. The Roanoke port depended upon another related project, perhaps the most ambitious part of Murphey’s plan. To reconnect Roanoke directly with the Atlantic Ocean, Murphey hoped to create a “canal” through the outer banks in the vicinity of the former Roanoke Inlet, below present-day Nags Head. The state legislature, in fact, approved such an undertaking in 1795 and incorporated a company for the venture, but they took little action. Murphey, on the other hand, helped to found a state Board of Internal Improvements in 1919 that hired the English engineer Hamilton Fulton to conduct a full survey and offer a feasibility report. Most of the water from the Albemarle Sound watershed flowed through Croatan Sound and into Pamlico, and Fulton and Murphey became convinced that cutting an artificial inlet across from Roanoke Island and damming Croatan and Roanoke Sounds would effectively establish

⁴² Archibald D. Murphey, *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey*, William Henry Hoyt, ed., Vol. I, (Raleigh: E.M. Uzzell, 1914), 141; Archibald D. Murphey, *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey*, William Henry Hoyt, ed., Vol. II, (Raleigh: E.M. Uzzell, 1914), 20, 121.

a “permanently navigable” passage. The only problem was the cost—approximately \$2.3 million—which no governmental body would consider. In successive decades, engineers made new surveys, always agreeing with Fulton’s basic premise, and a federal grant of \$50,000 made in 1856 initiated the cutting of a new Roanoke Canal. Congress abandoned the project before all the money was spent after successive excavations quickly filled with sand and frustrated engineers.⁴³

Thwarted but unwilling to concede after the failure of the Fulton plan, Murphey turned his attention to Ocracoke. Despite what he called the “peculiar gurgitating quality” of Ocracoke Inlet, Murphey asserted that “if a better Outlet cannot be found for the rich commerce of these Rivers, such improvement should be made at Ocracoke as the situation of the Inlet will admit, and the revenues of the State able to meet.”⁴⁴ Efforts to dredge a deep and reliable passage through Ocracoke inlet and cut a channel and harbor for the village—to mechanically alter the inlet rather than relying on specialized knowledge—became a project for the federal government.

The Ocracoke project brought the Army Corps of Engineers for the first time to the outer banks. Work began in 1827 and dredging commenced three years later. By 1832, a Lieutenant Dutton, one of the chief engineers involved, reported quite optimistically that “The most favorable circumstance attending the operations is the apparent permanency of the work already executed, contradicting in this essential point the opinions generally entertained.” Self-congratulations, however, quickly turned to uncertainty and then

⁴³ Murphey, *Papers of Archibald D. Murphey*, Vol. II, 23, 37-38; Hinshaw, “North Carolina Canals,” 5-6; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 86-87. The Fulton quote is from Stick, 86.

⁴⁴ Murphey, *Papers of Archibald D. Murphey*, Vol. II, 126.

abandonment. Two years after praising the “apparent permanency” of the dredging, Dutton explained that though the work was “partially successful . . . there were circumstances . . . arising out of the peculiar nature of the locality which . . . create strong doubts of the practicability of improving this navigation to the extent desired.” By late October of 1837, Lieutenant Alexander Swift expressed even stronger misgivings and offered an open-ended conclusion: “I *now* regard the possibility of any *immediate* improvement as very doubtful, and therefore respectfully recommend to the Department a cessation for the present of the operations there.” In the end the logic of locals who had long adapted themselves to the whims of barrier morphology rather than trying to control it carried the day; the inlet won. The experiment cost the federal government \$133,732.40.⁴⁵

Ocracoke Inlet’s “peculiar gurgitating quality,” the tendency of the lanes of passage to quickly shoal and change course, continued to befuddle engineers’ desires. Fifty-six years after the first abortive project, interest in improving Ocracoke inlet once again brought the Army Corps to the task. This time the engineer in charge of carrying out a preliminary survey, Major W. S. Stanton, cited the previous failures and, noting the decreasing importance of Ocracoke Inlet, favored improvement of the Dismal Swamp canal, leading to an obvious conclusion. In his final remarks Stanton urgently opposed the project, characterizing an “attempt to make and maintain such an enlargement of any one of the channels on the inner shoals as hazardous in the extreme.” Corps superiors disagreed. Political pressure led by William A. B. Branch of North Carolina’s first congressional district

⁴⁵ *The Executive Documents of the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Fifty Third Congress, 1893-1894*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 1360-1361. Quotes from the Ocracoke Inlet project in the 1820s and 1830s are taken from Lieutenant Stanton’s report. Italics are in the original quote.

proved irresistible, and a second attempt to improve Ocracoke Inlet commenced in 1895. At first successful, the channel began to shoal within a few years. Meanwhile, private investors deepened and widened the Dismal Swamp Canal in 1896. In 1913, Congress purchased the Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal for the federally sponsored Intracoastal Waterway and most commerce diverted from Ocracoke, bearing out Stanton's argument and rendering continued improvement of the inlet undesirable.⁴⁶ The Intracoastal Waterway connected the eastern seaboard through a network of internal passageways, avoided the hazardous ocean lanes, and at last fulfilled long-held desires for maritime commerce on the North Carolina coast: the outer banks were no longer necessarily in the way.

The creation of the Intracoastal Waterway also reflected the increasing size and role of the national state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the decades following the Civil War, the federal government actively promoted economic expansion. Policies toward the unsettled West exemplified this principle; the emigration of people accompanied the enlargement of federal prerogatives to violently remove the native competition, dispense land to railroad companies and settlers, and transform the West into a great hinterland of eastern urban centers of concentrated capital.⁴⁷ In many ways, the West could not have been settled as it was without federal intervention. The outer banks, lands of limited resources, scattered and isolated communities, and dangerous shoals, formed in a

⁴⁶ *The Executive Documents of the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Fifty Third Congress, 1893-1894*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 1359-1368; *Report of the Secretary of War; Being Part of the Two Houses of Congress at the Beginning of the First Session of the Fifty-Fourth Congress*, Volume 2, Part 2, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 48-49.

⁴⁷ This assertion is largely taken from William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991); Walter LaFeber also argued that policies of continental and overseas expansion during the late nineteenth century were dominated by industrial interests in Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

sense an eastern frontier, a land that remained to be tamed. The engineering projects and structures emplaced on the banks throughout the nineteenth century were attempts to deal with the obstacles. After the Union victory, federal presence across the islands quickly expanded, especially in the 1870s, as Congress reconstructed and enlarged lighthouses, finalizing three of the five that remained through the 20th century; established Lifesaving Stations, forerunners of the Coast Guard, across the banks; installed a National Weather Bureau Stations at Cape Hatteras and Kitty Hawk; linked all of these elements to urban areas by telegraph; and incorporated villages down the banks, establishing post offices and employing regular mail boats to connect them with larger trade and communication networks.⁴⁸ Though federal projects for the banks continued to consider the islands abstractly and searched primarily for ways to modify them to serve commercial endeavors, the view from the banks and the view from the state became increasingly and inextricably entangled as projects for each group came to depend upon the cooperation of the other.

The federal presence in the late nineteenth century altered possibilities for living on the islands. Among federal projects, the Lifesaving Service proved most important to locals. As the name suggests, the Lifesaving Service aided vessels and seamen in distress, and tales of the servicemen's often death-defying heroism to save victims along the dangerous banks coast pervaded local lore. Emplaced near communities of watermen, twenty-five Lifesaving Stations dotted the banks by 1883, offering employment mostly to locals and becoming the major source of regular income on the islands for roughly seventy years. Communities slightly grew as a significant percentage of islanders received government checks after the

⁴⁸ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 168-169, 174.

1870s.⁴⁹ Though it would be difficult to prove with existing records, The Lighthouse and the Lifesaving Services must have done a great deal to incrementally endow islanders with a national consciousness.

Social changes accompanying federal interaction with islanders gained symbolic resonance with the creation of post offices over the course of several decades. In establishing the post offices, federal officials asserted the superiority of their own claims on the communities by actually renaming them, from either more complicated, largely Indian-derived names or names repetitive of existing towns, to others more legible to or more easily organized by bureaucratic centers. The villages of North and South Chicamacomico thus became Rodanthe and Waves; Clarks turned into Salvo; Kinnakeet became Avon; The Cape post office subsequently read Buxton; those corresponding with residents of Trent afterward addressed their letters to Frisco. Hatteras and Ocracoke did not change. Villagers in places with altered appellations continued to use the former names and for more than a generation effectively had two place names, one representing their local identity, the other a national connection. Eventually most of the old names were obscured and even forgotten with time, but villagers resisted losing Kinnakeet and Chicamacomico, which were suppressed by the new names but never fully lost from usage.⁵⁰

The postwar influx of northern capital and increasing connections to national industrial markets proved equally as influential as federal expansion to banks societies,

⁴⁹ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 87-88, 175; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 169-176.

⁵⁰ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 93, 98; H.H. Brimley, *A North Carolina Naturalist: H. H. Brimley, Selections from His Writing*, ed. Eugene P. Odum, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 29. Brimley mentions that the villages along the banks in the early 20th century had two names, "one the old name by which everybody knows and calls them and the other made in Washington, I suppose, and mostly used in directing letters."

perhaps even more so. The local environment offered two major commodities that locals long used for subsistence and that supported large-scale exploitation in the postwar era: migratory waterfowl and diverse fisheries. As with federal projects along the banks, post-Civil War economic growth only intensified processes already underway by the early 1800s, but fish and fowl markets expanded massively after the war to develop sophisticated organizational structures, linking the outer banks to northern urban centers through vast networks of water and rail.⁵¹

Market hunting on the banks was largely concentrated on the northern or Currituck Banks where marsh grasses grew thick and waterfowl abounded. When Nathaniel Bishop made his way by paper canoe into eastern North Carolina, his first experiences reflected the changing nature of the banks landscape. As he crossed from the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal into Currituck Sound that winter, Bishop entered an estuary radically transformed from the closing of Currituck Inlet in 1828. Oysters, once plentiful, no longer existed as the sound became a freshwater habitat supporting denser and more diverse salt marsh grasses. The grasses, in turn, attracted greater populations of migratory waterfowl. Passing over the waters, Bishop marveled at swans “in flocks of twenties and fifties. . . . Clouds of ducks, and some Canada geese, as well as brant, kept up a continuous flutter as they rose from the surface of the water.” Predators followed new food sources, as gulls, crows and crabs, for instance, supported themselves by feeding on bird eggs or on young hatchlings.⁵² And predators of adult birds soon arrived toting guns.

⁵¹ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 71-73, 88.

⁵² Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 157; Weiland, “Currituck Sound,” 76-77; Thomas Gilbert Pearson, *Adventures In Bird Protection, An Autobiography*, (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Incorporated, 1937), 115. Pearson describes common predators of bird eggs in Currituck.

Roughly corresponding to the time of the inlet's closing, hunters began seasonally to migrate with the birds to the southeastern Atlantic seaboard, setting out each winter to take advantage of the concentrated populations in this major artery of the Atlantic Flyway. Arriving in December, Bishop had coincidentally timed his visit for the middle of the market hunting season. Not far into the sound, a stiff gale threatened his safety, and the proprietor of Bell Island beckoned him ashore and engaged him in conversation. Shooting swans was on the gentleman's mind. As he explained to the northerner, looking out at the white flocks in the sound, "It is hard work to get hold of a swan . . . You must use a good rifle to bring one down," preferably following the reverse of a strong gale, so they can be "shot as they rise against the wind." Americans' interests in killing birds were driven less by natural predation from need than by culturally-specific desires. Ducks were most abundant in the Currituck area and flocks would land in the sound to create "rafts," an extensive layer of bodies that visually stretched across the expanse of water. Among many other birds, Americans consumed ducks regularly as food. Hunters also responded to strong demands in the millinery trade especially in the 1880s and 1890s when wearing feathers and even entire birds on hats became a prominent feature of women's fashion. Egrets, terns, spoonbills, gulls, herons and many other birds that frequented the marshland sounds of the outer banks were thus taken not for their flesh but for their feathers. In either instance, poor hunters shot birds en masse to procure essential items for their families and sent their kills mainly to urban centers where demand generated. Determinations for using elements of the environment—

that is, the cultural ecology of places like the outer banks—were thus wrapped in overlaying connections between cities and hinterlands.⁵³

Thick stands of tall marsh grasses obscured the Currituck Banks from the sound, and Bishop reportedly saw no people for most of its length. As he paddled southward, Bishop found regular settlements where “a few rods from each little house, arose the duck-blind, with the gunner and his boat inside, anxiously watching for birds, while their decoys floated quietly on the surface of the water.” Following the industry’s inception, the efficiency of waterfowl hunting quickly increased and traders developed a well-defined organizational structure for harvesting and shipping birds as commodities. Already by the 1850s the famous agronomist Edmund Ruffin had remarked that bird hunting had become “as sure as the profits of any ordinary labor of agriculture or trade,” and the business continued to grow in importance, especially with the rise of the feather market.⁵⁴

The common method for taking waterfowl during the late nineteenth century was to construct a so-called “battery,” a coffin-shaped raft that lay low to the water and obscured the hunter in the marsh grasses, and to surround the battery with the numerous wooden and sometimes live decoy ducks, used to convince moving flocks of the safety and desirability of the spot. Hunters usually arrived before sunrise and bagged their first birds early in the day; on a good day, massive flocks would keep the man shooting until sunset, and when he

⁵³ Pearson, *Adventures In Bird Protection*, 113-115. Pearson mentions common species targeted for their feathers; Ruffin, *Sketches of Lower North Carolina*, 152, discusses “rafts” of ducks; A more thorough discussion of bird hats and connections between hunters and urban demands can be found in Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures With Nature in Modern America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999); The concept of overlapping spheres of influence between cities and hinterlands is mostly borrowed from Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*. Besides reference to cultural ecology in this regard, Cronon says something very similar on page 278, that “In economic and environmental terms, we should think of a city and its hinterland not as two clearly defined and easily recognizable places but as a multitude of overlapping market and resource regions,” though this is also a basic point of his larger thesis.

⁵⁴ Bishop, *Voyage of the Paper Canoe*, 163; Ruffin, *Sketches of Lower North Carolina*, 152-153.

finished he would take a small schooner around and collect his winnings. Daily kills varied, but one man shooting a hundred ducks per day was not uncommon. Before the availability of ice, hunters hung their prizes up overnight to cure, packed them in barrels the following day, and shipped them to Norfolk for transshipment farther north. By the turn of the 20th century, the method of taking ducks to market changed with new technologies. Local buyers frequented the sounds, paying for each bird and shipping them directly to a packing house, where they were placed in barrels layered with ice and taken to market. Specific prices that each species carried during the 19th century are difficult to come by and varied over time. Between 1903 and 1909, local buyers reportedly paid over \$100,000 annually to around 400 duck hunters in Currituck County alone, but averages can be misleading. Thomas Pearson, a major voice in the early North Carolina Audubon Society, wrote in 1905 that while one group of three men received \$1,700 for 2,300 ruddy ducks, a few years prior the same bag would have earned them a mere \$85.⁵⁵

As market hunting flourished, North Carolinians engaged much more extensively in an equally volatile industry of the sounds, that of commercial fishing. Prior to the Civil War, lack of transportation and consumer tastes dictated fishery markets. Fisherman targeted a few fish species—primarily herring, shad and mullet—that retained a desirable taste after salting. Following the war, several elements converged to change market demand and, thereby, local relationships to the sounds. The completion of the deep-draft Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal and regular steamboat traffic enabled fish harvested in North Carolina to arrive in

⁵⁵ Titus Stewart Critcher, "An Investigation of the Waterfowl Resources on Currituck Sound, North Carolina During the 1947-1948 and 1948-1949 Hunting Seasons," Unpublished Masters Thesis, North Carolina State University, (Raleigh: 1949, Department of Zoology and Entomology), 34-35; Pearson, *Adventures in Bird Protection*, 117-118.

northern markets in a few days rather than weeks or even months. The availability of ice created an alternative to salting fish, and consumers increasingly demanded fresh seafood. Postwar northern prosperity also brought venture capital to the North Carolina coast, and northern vessels and fishing techniques created new possibilities for harnessing the natural capital of local waters. Converting fish into other commodities by sending them to urban centers quickly became the primary means of earning a living from the banks in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁶

Those living along the North Carolina coast had long supplemented their income by fishing. When an anonymous French traveler journeyed through the colonies in 1765, he noted “great quantities of herin (herring)” among the less valuable commodities shipped from New Bern fishermen on the Neuse River. Within a decade, planters along the Chowan River, an Albemarle Sound tributary, began to take advantage of the dense schools of herring and shad that frequented the river each spring from March to mid-May. The same inlets that served as shipping lanes also functioned as highways for migratory fish entering the rich sounds behind the banks, and it was through these passages that the anadromous shad and herring traveled, returning to the freshwater streams of their youth to spawn. More of their numbers crowded the Chowan than elsewhere, but start-up costs to exploit them were restrictive. Relying on large nets (around 1,000 feet long), hired free black and slave labor, and several boats, the Chowan fisheries remained a very minority enterprise through the mid-nineteenth century. Trade remained regional. Fishermen salted and packed their catch on the

⁵⁶ Mark T. Taylor, “Seiners and Tongers: North Carolina Fisheries in the Old and New South,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 69 (Jan. 1992), 12; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 20, 35-38.

riverbanks and sold most of the fish not to urban consumers but as local food for slaves and poor settlers.⁵⁷

Following the Civil War, demands for fresh fish diversified the marketable species in North Carolina waters and expanded existing fisheries. Accessible buyers and new, relatively inexpensive gear meant that banks residents could for the first time profitably devote their time to pursuing fish. Fishermen mostly worked dragging dip nets and sweep nets through the sound waters, but they also engaged in haul seine fishing from the shore. Use of a stationary net, the pound net, probably did more than any other technique to democratize fishing in the sounds. A wall of mesh tied to stakes driven into the sound floor, somewhat similar to a tennis net, pound nets interrupted fish migrations and led them into a heart-shaped holding area that then concentrated the fish into a rectangular net cage near the shore called the “pound.” Fishermen then used dip nets to harvest their catch. First used in Albemarle Sound in 1869, the low overhead costs and economizing of labor undercut the haul-seine fisheries along the Chowan River that previously dominated Albemarle. Despite stiff opposition from powerful and entrenched interests, the ease with which pound nets enabled individuals to turn a profit proved irresistible. “By 1896,” writes historian Mark Taylor, “there were at least 1,125 pound nets on Albemarle Sound and only a handful of haul-seine fisheries remained.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “A French Traveler in the Colonies, 1765,” reprinted in *American Historical Review*, vol. 26, no. 4 (July 1921), 735; Mark T. Taylor, “Seiners and Tongers: North Carolina Fisheries in the Old and New South,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 69 (Jan. 1992), 2-4; Porte Crayon, “Scenery on the Chowan,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, no. 82, vol. 14 (March 1857), 438-442. Crayon’s account is the most detailed first-hand observation of these fisheries operations during the 1950s. Frederick Law Olmstead also witnessed these fisheries and made similar, though less extensive, observations in his *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*.

⁵⁸ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 216-218; Taylor, “Seiners and Tongers,” 11-17.

Accessible gear and markets led a majority of islanders to fish commercially for a living. When the state undertook the first full census of the area, among banks villages surveyors listed a slight majority of fishermen only at Hatteras Island. By 1870, the census listed over 55% of men across the banks as primarily fishermen, and those engaged in other activities often gained a part-time livelihood from dipping nets in sound waters. Fishing operations remained small-scale. In Dare County, which included Hatteras and Roanoke Islands as well as the part of the northern banks, fishermen registered no vessels, the designation for ships over 5 tons, even through the twentieth century. The scale of fisheries in Dare County stood in stark contrast to the burgeoning fishing ports at Beaufort and Morehead City, located just southwest of Cape Lookout, where nine fish factories shipped approximately 900,000 pounds of fresh fish per year. By the end of the nineteenth century, Morehead City was second only to Gloucester, Massachusetts as the leading fishing port on the East Coast.⁵⁹

This expansion of fishing industries contained much more than simply a new way to make a living; it carried with it important social changes as well. Prior to organized fish markets, islanders fished indiscriminately mostly to feed their families, pulling whatever was available from the sounds almost exclusively along the perimeter or near the inlets. As subsistence came to center around trade in fish in exchange for other goods, banks residents developed a commercial relationship to the sounds and came to know the estuarine environment through their labor, developing highly detailed knowledge of the migration patterns and behaviors of particular fish. Fishermen learned to ‘read the water’ and look for

⁵⁹ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 212; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 38, 73-74; Taylor, “Seiners and Tongers,” 14.

subtle clues from animal behaviors. Seeing oil pools along the water surface of the ocean, for instance, often meant that bluefish were feeding on the prolific schools of the small, fatty menhaden that frequented the coast. Locals also looked to birds. The depth and angle at which seabirds dove to catch fish could provide important indicators as to which fish could be found in a given spot.⁶⁰

Commercial fishing linked bankers both to natural fish spawning cycles and to the unnatural flux of markets that determined whether or not the same fish that proved valuable one week would be worth catching the next. Fishing tied the North Carolina sounds to waters elsewhere through urban markets. North Carolina was especially wedded to the Chesapeake Bay, where a good year in a certain fishery often precluded valuable returns on the same fishery in North Carolina. Fishermen had also to deal with sudden plummets in populations of valuable fish. Bluefish, one of the earliest commercialized species, attracted over 100 crews annually along the banks by the mid-1870s catching 4,000 to 5,000 fish, but without apparent warning the fish nearly disappeared by the end of the decade, only to later rebound. Shellfish also became marketable along with freshwater fish, and North Carolinians massively dredged oyster beds during the late 1880s and 1890s. Oyster catches rose dramatically between 1887 and 1890, increasing from around 100,000 bushels to 2,800,000 bushels, and reached a tipping point in the 1898-1899 season with the harvesting of 2,450,000 bushels. Apparently due to overharvesting, the fishery plummeted to 500,000

⁶⁰ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 212; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 38, 73, discusses pre- and post-Civil War fishing along the banks; The concept of knowing nature through one's labor is from Richard White, who expound the idea in a couple of works. See especially Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 3-29; Banks fishermen's ability to read the waters and birds for signs of commercially important fish is recounted in *Final Draft Report: An Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages Adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Selected Interpretive Themes*, submitted to: National Park Service, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, (La Jolla, CA: Impact Assessment, Inc, 2005), 357.

bushels soon after the turn of the century despite legislation in 1891 limiting dredging. Never again would oyster harvests approach previous levels.⁶¹ Commercializing the North Carolina sounds meant subjecting the estuary to the short-term vision of market demand, dictating which species fishermen could turn into a profit even at the expense of sustainability.

Fishing for a living marked a new way for villagers from settled communities like Hatteras, Avon, Rodanthe, Ocracoke, and Kitty Hawk to labor for pay. Changes, however, were more modest on the banks than in other places. In the large fish ports of Beaufort and Morehead City, workers in fish processing centers organized themselves around an industrial schedule and labored for salaries. On the banks, villagers were only partially touched by such organized wage labor. Outside investors founded a short-lived clam cannery at Ocracoke Village in the 1870s and “porpoise factories,” which processed the oil from bottle-nosed dolphins, lasted from the 1880s to 1920s at Hatteras Village. Prior to the 20th century most banks villagers did not process the fish they caught, selling them instead to buyers for processing and packing elsewhere. Rather than subjecting themselves to an owner’s clock, banks fishermen rose with the sun, plied the water with their nets and skilled knowledge, and, maintaining a maximum of control over their labor, tried to turn that labor into profit.⁶²

Despite their commercial orientation, most banks societies remained extremely cash poor. Though fish had certain value according to market demand, fishermen did not necessarily trade their catch for cash. Connected only by water and sail, islanders remained distant from paying markets and they frequently traded rather than sold fish. The most

⁶¹ Taylor, “Seiners and Tongers,” 12, 24-29; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 80, 83.

⁶² Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 85; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 230; David Cecelski, *A Historian’s Coast: Adventures Into the Tidewater Past*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000), 81-86;

important fish that islanders did prepare on the banks was mullet, which they continued to salt and barter with mainland farmers to obtain cornmeal and other necessary foods. Commodities readily available elsewhere often eluded banks fishermen for their dearth of cash. Edward Earll, who surveyed North Carolina's fisheries in the 1880s for the US Fish Commission, noted that along coastal villages "many a man with a large family has less than \$50 in money during the entire year."⁶³ Banks fishermen continued to rely on a largely barter economy into the early 20th century. Until the reorientation of banks economies toward tourism, government employment continued to be the mainstay of liquid funds on the outer banks.⁶⁴

Through the 19th century, the outer banks remained a marginal landscape, one that could be settled and developed only in limited ways. Where wind, water, and sand converged to forge thin barrier islands subject to the salt spray and storm surge overwash of the Atlantic, the land left few options for successful settlement. Some effectively colonized the islands or used them successfully as bases for fishing and fowling. For many Europeans, it was a landscape of failure. The Roanoke colonists were only the first to come to the banks and fail. Though Amadas and Barlowe reported great plenty, later visitors having experienced the abundance on the American mainland saw only scarcity. The islands were unable to conform to the ideals of most farmers seeking to improve a private plot of land. Barrier forests could not be cleared and cultivated to serve ambitious plantations, and

⁶³ Taylor, "Seiners and Tongers," 18; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 217-219; R. Edward Earll, "North Carolina and Its Fisheries," in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, II, George Brown Goode, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Commission of Fish and Fisheries, 5 Sections, 1884-1887), 483.

⁶⁴ Buddy Merrill, "Vendues Along the Outer Banks," *Sea Chest*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring), 12-13; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 158-161.

settlement was left to the very poor. It was precisely because the outer banks were a landscape of scarcity and poverty that colonial, state, and federal officials discussed the banks only as barriers to trade or as boons to invading armies. Locals' ability to modify the outer banks landscape changed relatively little even after the expansion of commercial fish and fowl markets, though island social structures and the local meaning of that environment had changed. Many who came to the islands through the late-19th century continued to think of the outer banks not as pristine and natural, but as unproductive space. The sand-swept beaches remained remote wastelands.⁶⁵

Different groups of people nevertheless re-imagined the landscape to use it successfully in ways that conformed to their desires. Whereas most Algonquians used the islands seasonally, Europeans introduced not only their livestock, crops, and pathogens, but non-native ideas as well, carving out permanent, privately owned plots bounded by fences. Colonial and then state officials had their own ideas for the banks. Seeing them as a barrier to trade, they sought to modify inlets and shoals in various ways to mitigate the burdensome landmass. Paralleling the intensification of efforts to engineer the banks and create new federal services in the interest of maritime traffic following the Civil War, transportation technologies and northern capital opened to exploitation the natural wealth of the adjacent marshlands and sounds. By selling their catch or participating in federal projects, islanders found new ways to make the banks productive through their labor. Both of these endeavors were linked to ongoing governmental efforts to modify the land and the waterways that serviced commodity exchange. The outer banks that Nathaniel Bishop found were in many

⁶⁵ That outsiders saw the banks as a limited, poor landscape is evident in the writings of Ruffin and Bishop, among others.

ways already a creation of the state and federal governments. The societies he witnessed were constructed, in part, as responses to these evolving conditions. By the turn of the 20th century, the objectives of those with a view from the banks and a view from the state had become increasingly intertwined. The entanglement of these perspectives, in modified forms, persisted on the banks into the twentieth century, and they are critical to understanding subsequent tensions and alignments that followed new ways of using, preserving, and earning a living from the outer banks.

CHAPTER II

Making Claims on the Past: North Carolina Banks Cultures, 1900-1933

“Hunting and fishing, the most important employments of mankind in the rude state of society, become in its advanced state their most agreeable amusements, and they pursue for pleasure what they once followed from necessity. In the advanced state of society, therefore, they are all very poor people who follow as a trade, what other people pursue as a pastime.”

—Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*¹

At the turn of the century, a pair of brothers and Ohioan bicycle shop owners visited the northern banks and sought there to conduct a series of experiments to test a glider they designed and built. If successful, they would continue experiments in an attempt to create the first heavier-than-air flying machine. After considering several similar places, Orville and Wilber Wright chose the outer banks for the landscape’s abstract physical qualities. Coastal winds would allow them to undertake frequent test flights, and abundant expanses of barren sands would ensure consistent gusts and lessen the danger of crashing. After four years of trials the Wright brothers ultimately succeeded, and the first motorized flight at Kill Devil Hills in 1903 brought them world-wide fame. Americans soon hailed flight as not only a personal but also a national achievement, and the Wright Brothers became cultural icons. The Wrights’ ventures first to the small fishing village of Kitty Hawk in 1900 and in successive years to Kill Devil Hills, an area named after a prominent sand dune, became legend, part of

¹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Great Minds Series, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 107.

the national narrative of triumph and ingenuity.² The Wright Brothers became the most famous and important individuals associated with the Outer Banks.

When the Wrights came to the North Carolina coast, they were not widely known. Before the 1903 flight, local newspapers mentioned their experiments in passing, if at all. There was at first little certainty of success.³ Orville and Wilber Wright hoped the venture would produce useful insights, but they were determined not to take the trip for nothing. Probably to justify this prolonged and expensive absence from his family and his business in search of an elusive goal, Wilber wrote to his father upon arrival that “My trip would be no great disappointment if I accomplish practically nothing. I look upon it as a pleasure trip pure and simple.”⁴ The Wright brothers came to the outer banks as any average visitor—not associated with an organized outing and with enough money to take a prolonged hiatus from work—might have in the early 1900s. As outsiders knowing almost nothing of the banks or of local society before arrival, the Wrights were ideal observers. They kept journals, wrote frequent letters, and even took a few photographs.

Recounting the Wright brothers’ story serves two purposes. Orville’s and Wilber’s experiences and observations help both to contextualize early twentieth-century banks societies and also highlight the problems and limitations speculators soon faced promoting tourism. In the 1920s, boosters sought to mitigate those limitations by linking the Wrights’ achievement to the place of their experiments, by mediating the past through a national

² The Wright Brothers’ story is widely known and publicized. A brief account of the basic narrative is Barbara Craig, *The Wright Brothers and Their Development of the Airplane*, (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1972). A thorough account is Stephen Kirk, *First in Flight: The Wright Brothers in North Carolina*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publisher, 1995).

³ Kirk, *First in Flight*, 50-52.

⁴ Marvin W. McFarland, ed., *The Papers of Wilber and Orville Wright: Including the Chanute-Wright letters and other Papers of Octave Chanute*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1953), 27.

monument that could at once honor a scientific achievement, promote national cohesiveness, encourage tourism locally, and increase the value of nearby lands.⁵ The Wright brothers' story thus serves as a window onto outer banks village culture while also becoming a way of remaking island culture to serve the interests of new custodians, to create new meanings of place. In telling the story of the Wrights, quite apart from what they actually did accomplish during their stay, it is the details of the Wrights' "pleasure trip" that are of interest.

Kitty Hawk, located north of Nags Head on the northern banks, was in 1900 an obscure village even to mainland locals. It was, however, a national connection that attracted the Wright brothers to the village. In response to an inquiry to the US Weather Bureau, Willis Moore, the head of the Weather Bureau equipped the Wrights with tables charting the average hourly wind velocities at every weather station in the country. Appealing statistics from the Kitty Hawk Weather Bureau station and a favorable response to their letter of inquiry about the landscape convinced the experimenters to come. Wilber set out first with the glider and Orville followed a few days later with basic supplies. Trains connected Elizabeth City to Dayton, Ohio, and the Kitty Hawk postmaster, William Tate, told the brothers that steamers could take them from there to Manteo, on Roanoke Island, from which they could reach Kitty Hawk. Wilber arrived unprepared for the isolation of tidewater North Carolina. It took him two days by train to arrive at Elizabeth City, a small port town on the

⁵ Many studies detail the commemoration of the Wright Brothers achievement, though none that I have found examine it critically or analyze the motivations. Most detailed accounts are studies conducted by the National Park Service. Basic information is in William R. Chapman and Jill K. Hanson, *Wright Brothers National Memorial Historic Resource Study*, (Atlanta: National Park Service, Southeast Field Area, 1997), 37-62. The most thorough account is Andrew M. Hewes, *Wright Brothers National Memorial: An Administrative History*, (National Park Service, Division of History, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Dec. 22, 1967). A brief, but more accessible, account is Kirk, *First in Flight*, 258-269.

Pasquotank River, but over four more days to travel the 35 miles from there to Kitty Hawk.⁶ The problems were manifold. Having missed the Friday steamer to Manteo, Wilber, in his words, “spent several days waiting for a boat to Kitty Hawk. No one seemed to know anything about the place or how to get there.” Fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of young native Kitty Hawker Israel Perry, Wilber climbed aboard an old, beaten schooner and made his way at long last to an unfamiliar destination.⁷

The journey was long and arduous. After several hours en route, the heavy winds that brought him to the southern coast turned violent and nearly ended the inventor’s adventure before it began:

The strain of rolling and pitching sprung a leak and this, together with what water came over the bow at times, made it necessary to bail frequently. At 11 o’clock the wind had increased to a gale and the boat was gradually being driven nearer and nearer the north shore, . . . In a severe gust the foresail was blown loose from the boom and fluttered to leeward with a terrible roar. The boy (Perry) and I finally succeeded in taking it in though it was rather dangerous work in the dark with the boat rolling so badly. . . [After the mainsail also suddenly tore loose,] The only chance was to make a straight run over the bar under nothing but a jib, so we took in the mainsail and let the boat swing round stern to the wind. This was a very dangerous maneuver in such a sea but was in some way accomplished without capsizing.⁸

Wilber and Perry landed along the shore of the North River, still along the northern limit of the Albemarle Sound. After smashing into the bank, they waited out the weather, practically without rations, and did not approach Kitty Hawk until the following night.⁹

⁶ Kirk, *First in Flight*, 23-29.

⁷ McFarland, *Papers of Wilber and Orville Wright*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁹ Kirk, *First in Flight*, 31-32. Reportedly, Israel Perry had “some sort of hash” that Wilber refused to eat, and Wilber had only a jar of jelly that he had packed. Wilber said he was “starving” by the time they reached their destination.

Wilber's experience was not exactly typical. Had he or Perry realized the weather in store for them, surely they would have postponed the voyage. Yet Wilber faced characteristic problems that suggest a great deal about the turn-of-the-century banks. The islands connected to the mainland only by boat, wind or steam, and water. Traveling to the banks required great expenditures of energy—not only solar energy, in the form of wind or coal, but also strenuous labor.¹⁰ Travel was potentially dangerous. Wilber's trip points to fundamental hindrances to economic expansion for those living on or invested in the islands. Without roads and bridges to link the banks directly to urban areas, places like Kitty Hawk would remain peripheral and poor, a village with which nobody even in a nearby port town seemed to have been familiar.

Wilber and Orville soon understood the consequences of Kitty Hawk's isolation. During their first several-weeks stay, the Wright brothers' attention turned nearly as often to their stomachs as to the problems of flight. The dearth of easily available foods stemmed from the general poverty of banks villagers, and the Wrights made this connection often in their writing. Regular staple luxuries, such as sugar, coffee, and tea were unavailable on the banks, and perishable items were limited and usually not for sale. Orville complained to his younger sister Katherine that supplies in the Kitty Hawk general store paled in comparison to his pantry back home. "What little canned goods, such as corn, etc. [there is,] is of such a nature that only a Kitty Hawker could down it. . . . They have never had anything good in their lives, and consequently are satisfied with what they have."¹¹ Kitty Hawkers lacked

¹⁰ Wind is caused the unequal heating of the equator and the poles by the sun and the mixing of air currents resulting from that unequal heating. Coal is made of the stored solar energy of formerly living plant matter in environments lacking adequate oxygen for detritus to completely decompose.

¹¹ McFarland, *Papers of Wilber and Orville Wright*, 32-33.

money, and without money they could command few commodities from outside. Their ability to supply the two visitors was exceedingly limited. Days later, Orville elaborated on his experience and emphasized Kitty Hawk's isolation: "Trying to camp down here reminds me constantly of those poor Arctic explorers. We are living nearly the whole time on reduced rations." Even consuming much less than they were accustomed, the prolonged company of two unproductive visitors resulted in visible local changes. Orville continued: "The economics of this place were so nicely balanced before our arrival that everybody here could live and yet nothing was wasted. Our presence brought disaster to the whole arrangement. We, having more money than the natives, have been able to buy up the whole egg product of the town and about all the canned goods in the store. I fear some of them will have to suffer as a result."¹²

There seemed to Orville to be an irony about the place. He saw poverty amidst great plenty. Though cows abounded, there was no regular supply of milk. Orville might have agreed with William Byrd 200 years earlier that it was foolish to let stock range freely and lose the supplementary benefits of dairy and dung. It was also clear that these animals' quality suffered from their isolation, that unlike animals marketed nationally these had not been selectively bred. "You never saw such poor, pitiful-looking creatures as the horses, hogs, and cows are down here," Orville wrote. Yet it was the lack of seafood in a fishing village that most confounded the visitor. "The fish are so thick you see dozens of them whenever you look down into the water." Nevertheless, though Kitty Hawk's made most of their income shipping "tons & tons of fish away every year to Baltimore and other northern

¹² *Ibid*, 39.

cities,” and “the only meat they ever eat is fish flesh,” there was never any for sale locally. “You can buy fish in Dayton at any time . . . but you can’t here. About the only way to get fish is to go and catch them yourself.” Thus though the islands hosted great numbers of stock animals, the waters teemed with fish and “The woods [were] filled with wild game,” fresh meat was hard to come by. When William Tate invited them to share a wild goose shot out of season, Orville admitted that it “tasted pretty good after a fast of several weeks in any kind of flesh except a mess or two of fish.”¹³

Though Kitty Hawk could yield enough food to keep the Wrights going, Tate warned them before they came that Kitty Hawk would be unable to provide them a room. The brothers stayed in tents their first year there and part of the second, and the tent’s thin walls forced the Wrights to confront the elements that made the place attractive to them in the first place—wind and sand. Facing sustained evening winds, at times the product of northeasters, Wilber and Orville passed several nights holding down and fixing their tent. When repairing the structure caused them to venture outside, “the sand fairly blinds us. It blows across the ground in clouds. We certainly can’t complain of the place,” Orville admitted, “We came down here for wind and sand and we have got them.”¹⁴ In fact, the Wrights chose a peculiar spot to camp: they slept near the top of an enormous sand dune, one that had rolled through and covered a previously well-vegetated area. Awed by the magnitude of the destruction, Orville wrote passionately:

But the sand! The sand is the greatest thing in Kitty Hawk and soon will be the only thing. The site of our tent was formerly a fertile valley, cultivated by some ancient Kitty Hawker. Now only a few rotten limbs, the topmost branches of trees that then

¹³ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

grew in this valley, protrude from the sand. The sea has washed and the wind blown millions and millions of loads of sand up in heaps along the coast, completely covering houses and forest. Mr. Tate is now tearing down the nearest house to our camp to save it from the sand.¹⁵

The sheer mass of dunes large enough to cover all but the highest treetops seemed to scoff at human desires. The only answer Kitty Hawk had to the uncanny forces of wind, water, and sand was to tear everything down and rebuild somewhere else.

The Wright brothers' encounter with turn-of-the-century Kitty Hawk reflected the basic conditions of the place. Isolated, cash-poor, and facing a volatile landscape, the limitations of living on a barrier island helped produce the local "Banker" culture that Orville and Wilber found. Aided by the Weather Bureau, but also later by members of the US Lifesaving Service, and noting the export-nature of the banks economy, the Wrights' experience underscored the ways in which connections to larger structures outside of the outer banks also served to recreate or redirect those societies by the early 20th century.

The Wright brothers left one of the best accounts of the culture particular to that place and time. Outer banks societies changed dramatically over the 20th century, especially with the advent of the automobile in the 1920s, federal projects on the islands beginning in the 1930s, and the rise of a tourist economy beginning in the 1920s but especially following World War II. To understand that change, it is important to contextualize the place that islanders knew, and the culture that locals afterward believed to have lost. Direct sources are scarce. The only means of constructing that past in any meaningful way rests on islanders' memories, on the stories villagers told in the 1970s through 2004 in voluminous oral histories. Those stories from people who grew up on the outer banks in the 1900s-1930s can

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

tell us a great deal about the social experience of living on the islands before the Depression. Yet, by the time islanders told these stories, most of what they remembered was gone. Their memories became a sort of mediation, seeking both to explain the society that was while also critiquing the late 20th century condition. Using those memories integrated into other sources where possible, this chapter will, in part, seek to outline some of the more significant aspects of banks culture that the Wright brothers encountered and suggest how it began to change.

In the 1920s, developers began buying up the northern banks between Nags Head and Kitty Hawk, across from Roanoke Island, and they used the Wright brothers' story itself to mediate the past. By linking the invention of the airplane, the place of the Wrights' experiments, and a shared national identity, boosters sought to market their new landholdings by making a claim on that history. Commemorations, as one historian recently wrote, are "a means of not only linking the past and present, but also a means of remaking both."¹⁶ Congress approved the construction of a monument to the Wright brothers at Kill Devil Hill, the site of their successful flight, to promote national pride following World War I. Local investors used the promise of that commemorating to promote their developments by linking the outer banks to a shared national narrative, and that claim, along with projections of greater tax revenues, helped convince the state to expand infrastructure on the east coast to serve increased visitation. As developers appealed to the past to redefine their present, the northern banks increasingly drew people with very different ways of seeing and using the outer banks islands. They formed a new culture around the beach resort. These new

¹⁶ This quote is directly from Richard White, though he attributes the idea to Margot Minardi. White's discussion of commemoration and historical mediation in his recently published speech for the OAH heavily influenced the framing of this and the preceding paragraph. Richard White, "A Commemoration and a Historical Mediation," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 94, no. 4, (March 2008), 1073.

custodians' claims for the banks, backed by more powerful political connections, helped to refashion not only the culture of the northern banks but they also served to reshape the outer banks more generally.

The People the Wright Brothers Found There

Early twentieth-century Kitty Hawk in many ways typified outer banks culture. Outside of Nags Head, which had become a seasonal resort for Albemarle planters dating back to the 1840s (a subject for later discussion), the remaining villages along the Carolina banks consisted of small permanent populations earning a living either through fishing, employment in the US Lifesaving Service (Coast Guard after 1915), as boat builders, or as wildfowl hunters or guides for increasing numbers of urban sportsmen. Usually banks villagers engaged in a number of activities to sustain themselves through the seasons, and the limited capital and foodstuffs the Wrights found in Kitty Hawk exemplified the hardships prevalent throughout banks villages in the early twentieth century. By 1900, living on the banks meant earning a living from national financial and transportation networks, as well as engaging to some degree with federal projects, whether that meant the Lifesaving Service, the Lighthouse Service, or the Weather Bureau.¹⁷

Yet, though similar compared to mainland cultures, each banks village differed by distinct cultural practices, and islanders did think of themselves as a homogeneous group. The idea that there was a shared “Banker” culture is misleading. To assert such a shared culture, as so many authors have done, belies the way that villagers thought about themselves

¹⁷ Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 71-73, 87-88.

and constructed their own identity. To be sure, villagers along the Carolina barriers shared strong cultural traits, but to conflate them into a singular society ignores inter-village rivalries and distinct cultural practices exclusive to certain villages. As Les Hooper of Salvo recalled, when he was growing up in the 1930s “every village had a distinct character . . . [There was a] Different language in each village. I could tell you where people come from on Hatteras Island by the way they talked.”¹⁸ Before roads connected them, Ocracoke village seemed a distant and foreign place to villagers on Hatteras Island, and villagers along Hatteras often identified only very locally.¹⁹

Local identities changed. By the late twentieth century, villagers who remained did become “Outer Bankers” in a sense, though they continued to self-identify by particular villages. As tourists and other outsiders came increasingly to compose island populations, those with distinct regional traits began to construct new imagined communities, or to construct existing identities in new ways, that coincidentally fit the categories that outsiders imposed. Ernie Foster, a charter fisherman at Hatteras village, put it this way: “When I was a kid on the water (in the late 1940s and ‘50s), the only voice you heard on the radio were watermen. Now I hear some Core Sounders (fishermen) on the radio—used to [be that] they

¹⁸ Leslie “Les” Hooper, interview by Barbara Garrity-Blake, Salvo, NC, 10 July 2004, National Park Service, Outer Banks Oral History Library, Outer Banks History Center, 652. The nearly 2,000 pages of transcripts from interviews conducted in 2004 are continuously paginated.

¹⁹ Many islanders described Ocracoke as being a place apart. Fanny Pearl Fulcher of Ocracoke said that when her dad, who was from the Hatteras cape area, asked Fanny’s grandfather for her mother’s hand in marriage, he began crying because of the distance she would be taken, explaining “I don’t mind her marrying you, but I don’t want you to take her up to Cape Woods.” Fanny Pearl Fulcher, interview by Michael V. Wurm, Ocracoke, NC, 5 August 1974, National Park Service, Outer Banks Oral History Library, Outer Banks History Center, 2; Ernie Foster, interview by Barbara Garrity-Blake, Hatteras, NC, 5 February 2004, National Park Service, Outer Banks Oral History Library, Outer Banks History Center, 343-344. Ernie, who was born in 1945, described the connections between his native Hatteras village, the southernmost village on Hatteras Island, and Ocracoke as being “Very close, but very limited . . . where the connections come is that people tend to marry from another village,” but there was little regular interaction.

were there and we were here and we were kind of competitors—but now I kind of [think], ‘Hey that’s a Core Sounder, let me get closer.’”²⁰ Similarly, by the late 1970s Hatteras villagers and Ocracokers emphasized their shared heritage rather than the particular village distinctions that defined their relationships in the early twentieth century. This transformation in local thinking was largely a reaction to tourism and development, but it also followed institutional changes, connected to but also outside of that development. Ernie Foster recounted that his grandmother told him the most significant change she saw for the islanders in her lifetime was not the creation of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore nor the transition to a tourist economy, but rather “the consolidation of the schools (in 1955). . . because it brought the island together” for the first time.²¹ Part of the creation of the Outer Banks, then was also the creation of “Outer Bankers,” a category long imposed on villagers along the banks, though never entirely accurate. Creating the Outer Banks meant not only managing and using the land in new ways, but likewise transforming cultural norms and practices that led to new relationships with the islands and new meanings of space for locals and outlanders alike. To understand these changes for the islanders, it is important to briefly sketch the cultures that predominated prior to later developments.²²

²⁰ Ernie Foster interview, 360. In a study of Ocracoke “brogue,” the local dialect, Walt Wolfram in a joint study with Natalie Schilling-Estes reported that a middle-aged group of Ocracokers spoke with thicker accents than the elderly residents, largely because their emphasis, Wolfram concluded, was a reaction to the fading dialect among theirs and the younger generation, *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks: The Story of the Ocracoke Brogue*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 24.

²¹ Ernie Foster interview, 365; When the NPS sent an agent, Marion Shuffler, to Hatteras to determine property lines around the villages in 1949, Shuffler reported that school consolidation was a bigger issue than a potential park, and locals were entirely preoccupied with the prospect of consolidating Hatteras Island schools. Cameron Binkley, *The Creation and Establishment of Cape Hatteras National Seashore: The Great Depression Through Mission 66*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, 2007), 86-87.

²² Outlining banks cultures in the early twentieth century will necessarily draw on several sources, but especially valuable are the voluminous oral histories that have been conducted between 1974 and 2004, between

Some villages changed more dramatically than others. Remnants of the community in Kitty Hawk, for instance, still persevered in local politics near end of the twentieth century, but any sense of the old fishing village drowned in the rapid development following World War II.²³ Other communities of the northern banks were creations of tourism. Kill Devil Hills, for instance, an uninhabited and dune-dominated stretch of island between Nags Head and Kitty Hawk when the Wright brothers came, incorporated as a municipality in 1953. The seven villages along Hatteras Island and Ocracoke village on Ocracoke Island, by contrast, retained their communities and, because they were surrounded by the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, cultures within these eight villages have been well documented. This study will likewise focus on the eight villages that preceded and survived the tourist transformation: from north to south, Rodanthe, Waves, Salvo, Avon, Buxton, Frisco, Hatteras, and Ocracoke.

Travelling south from the northernmost tip of Hatteras Island in 1900, one would have found that several of the villages existed in clumps, all located on the sound side in places where the barriers widen sufficiently to support forests, and, outside of Nags Head, hosting between a couple hundred and up to 600 residents.²⁴ Rodanthe, Waves, and Salvo, just below what came to be called “Pea Island,” formed one clump, formerly collectively known as Chicamacomico and still referred to as such by locals. In the Cape Woods, or

UNC’s Southern Historical Collection and the Nation Park Service. These oral histories were compiled in the *Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages Adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore*, cited below, and evidence will draw upon individual interviews when possible.

²³ David Stick, interview by author, Kitty Hawk, NC. 16 April 2007. David Stick lived in Kitty Hawk most of his life, and his family moved to Manteo in 1927.

²⁴ *Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900, Population: Part I*, William R. Merriam, director, (Washington: United States Census Office, 1901), 288, 290. The census gives Ocracoke’s population in 1900 as 548, though the other communities are listed together, either as Chicamacomico/Kennekeet [*sic*], with 842 residents between these four communities, and Hatteras, apparently including Buxton and Frisco, with 987 people. Because of the village’s proximity to Hatteras Inlet, Hatteras was one of the more populated villages and may have hosted a population comparable to that of Ocracoke, but precise numbers are difficult to surmise without looking at the detailed census data outside of the published statistical compilations.

Buxton Woods, where Hatteras Island bends dramatically from a southerly to a southwesterly direction, there was another clump, with Buxton at the northeastern part of the cape and Frisco near the northwest. Between the Chicamacomico and the Cape was a long stretch of thin, sandy island, broken where it widened out to support forest in one place. That was where Avon was located. At the time, Avon was two communities, neither of which locals referred to as Avon. Instead, there was Big Kinnakeet and Little Kinnakeet. Avon was just a location term for the postal service. In the 1920s the two closely associated Kinnakeets merged to form a single community. Continuing past the Cape, the next village was Hatteras, on a piece of land that extended into the sound in the shape of a shark fin. Crossing several more miles of barren barrier land, separated by a deep and powerful inlet, one would have arrived at Ocracoke village, the sole village on Ocracoke Island. Ocracoke was in a different county, Hyde County, from much of the rest of the banks. From Nags Head south to Hatteras village, and including Roanoke Island, was Dare County. Manteo, Dare's county seat, was the product of the county's creation in 1870.²⁵

The villages were defined locally by the family names that predominated in each locality. Like the villages themselves, family names also tended to exist in clumps, though often they spread widely between villages. Family names also broke down into "clans" that associated themselves with particular lineages in particular localities. The Midgett families make this case most obviously. Chicamacomico villages were flooded with Midgetts. In Rodanthe the Midgett family surname made up about 75% of the inhabitants, large proportions of Midgetts could be found in Waves and Salvo, and some Midgetts lived in

²⁵ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 93-104.

every village outside of Kinnakeet. In all, there were 35 distinct families of Midgetts on the two islands and none of them claimed relation to the others. The same phenomenon prevailed in all villages along the banks. Around 30 surnames made up all of the 2,377 residents of Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands in 1900, and many with the same surname, even within the same village, considered themselves a distinct family.²⁶ Last names were so commonly shared that in Ocracoke, and probably elsewhere, women often employed their husband's first name as an informal local surname.²⁷ Locals distinguished villages, too, by how close-knit and closed off their communities were, referring to particular villages as being more or less "clannish." The Chicamacomico villages and Avon were thought of as being more clannish, while the Cape villages and Hatteras were more open. Some locals described the latter as having less of a "community." In general, banks communities were very close, mutually supportive, and despite internal rivalries communities acted as extended families. In the early 20th century, Hatteras Island and Ocracoke villages were places where "Everybody knew everybody else," and a stranger would "scare you to death."²⁸

Outer banks villagers shared a similar dialect, referred to as "brogue," that many visitors noted as peculiar, and which outwardly distinguished locals from newcomers. Brogue means a dialect relating to Irish English, and there were some similarities in pronunciation. Most famously, the phrase 'high tide' was pronounced as if spelled 'hoi

²⁶ Ben Dixon MacNeill, *The Hatterasman*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1958), 228. Les Hooper interview, 654, also states that both of his parents were Hoopers from Salvo but were of "Different clans."

²⁷ Alton Ballance, *Ocracokers*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 117.

²⁸ *Final Draft Report: An Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages Adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Selected Interpretive Themes*, submitted to: National Park Service, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, (La Jolla, CA: Impact Assessment, Inc, 2005), 63, 113, 171, 205; The approximation of family names was derived from counting the names associated with each village in *Ethnohistorical Description*. Population of Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands in *Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900*, Population: Part I, William R. Merriam, director, (Washington: United States Census Office, 1901), 288, 290.

toide,' and islanders used several local phrases unique to their shores. Renowned linguist Walt Wolfram argued in his study of Ocracoke brogue, where the dialect remains strongest, that outer banks English originated from a mixture of Early Modern English dialects from Ireland, eastern England and southwestern England. Derivative from the language common to eastern North Carolina when the settlers colonized the islands, isolation sent the language's evolution in a unique direction locally. Interestingly, Wolfram found many similarities between Ocracoke English and Appalachian dialects, both attributed to similar ancestral settlements and long isolation from more mainstream language change.²⁹ It was variations on this common dialect that locals distinguished between island communities.

Banks societies often seemed provincial and strange from the outside. During Nathaniel Bishop's 1874 paper canoe voyage, he met numerous households along the islands and was struck not only by the queerness of local culture but also by generosity of his hosts and their frequent invitations to shelter and warm meals. "The houses were very small," Bishop reflected, "but the hearts of the poor folk were very large." Most commonly, Bishop accepted invitations to share the regionally distinct yaupon tea, "'the cup that cheers but not inebriates'," which bankers drank like water (perhaps to cover the sulfuric taste of their well water). Islanders by the late nineteenth century had a strong inclination for this brew. Among his first encounters along the North Carolina coast, Bishop overheard a woman upon her return from two years' stay in an unnamed city complaining of the China tea she had been forced to drink there and exclaiming to a bag boy, "you can't reckon how I longs to get a cup

²⁹ Wolfram, *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks*, 1, 9-15. Outer banks villagers also retained some particularly southern forms of speech, but their dialect was closer to what one found in northern rather than in southern states; Nathaniel H. Bishop, *Voyage of the Paper Canoe: A Geographical Journey of 2500 Miles, From Quebec to the Gulf of Mexico, During the Years 1874-1875*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard, Publishers, 1878), 194, remarked the uniqueness of local dialect.

of good yaupon.”³⁰ Peculiar tastes and distinct dialect reflected the isolated geography of the outer banks. The water surrounding the islands did connect villagers to mainland industries in limited ways, but the labor involved in servicing those connections meant that the broad, flat seascape could have been as high as mountains; cultural space remained exceedingly local.

Each community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries coalesced around central institutions. Most prominent were their churches. Rodanthe and Waves shared a church and formed a single community, while neighboring Salvo had a separate church and thought of themselves as a separate people. Every other banks community had independent churches that formed the centerpiece of village life, bringing the village together on the one day when nobody worked. Beginning in the early 19th century, Methodism prevailed on the banks until the late 1920s when Pentecostal missionaries brought their message to the islanders. Missionaries first came to Avon in 1927 and there founded the first Pentecostal ‘Assembly of God’ church, from which Pentecostalism spread both north and south, extending by the 1940s from Ocracoke to Salvo, but never into Rodanthe-Waves. With two churches, banks villages formed distinct communities between the congregations, which may have contributed to or solidified family (or “clan”) distinctions among villagers. Periodic Pentecostal tent revivals, held when itinerant preachers toured the banks, served as important social events for villagers, during which islanders crossed denominational lines in celebration and teenagers met potential partners. Church service also served a more regular social function outside of bringing people together in a shared space for spiritual benefit. After the usual service, families regularly visited each other in small groups for Sunday dinner. This

³⁰ Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 152-153, 179.

simple act of “visiting” was often described by elderly residents in the late 20th century as a defining characteristic of the lifestyle, since lost, that they remembered in their youth.³¹

Villagers also primarily interacted in two other central places: schools and community stores. Regular public schools formed in the first two decades of the 20th century. They were one-room schoolhouses serving a single village or, in the cases of Chicamacomico and the Cape by the 1930s, serving a series of nearby villages. Segregated schools were not an issue. The one African American family on the banks in the 1920s resided in Ocracoke; their children were simply excluded from public education. Graduating classes were quite small—fluctuating between a couple students to as many as ten—and none of them lasted beyond the tenth or eleventh grade. Graduates intent on earning a high school diploma had to finish their last year or two at mainland schools. Frequently, students finishing at the local schoolhouse opted instead to “quituate,” as they called it, to seek marriage and regular employment, the essence of adulthood. College was practically never discussed.³²

Outside of the churches and Sunday porch sojourns, adults frequented the community stores that Orville Wright found so unsatisfactory. Stocking basic goods and only staple food items before the county ran electricity to the villages in 1948, stores were necessary as the communities oriented toward commercial fishing. Community stores served as central entrepôts of local distribution and as a place where goods could be procured on credit for fishermen whose fortunes waxed and waned with sporadic fish runs and the weather. The first community store on Hatteras was the Burrus Red and White, founded just after the Civil War, and most villages followed suit in the 1870s. Besides their utilitarian functions,

³¹ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 30-35, 88, 116, 153, 177, 334.

³² Balance, *Ocracokers*, 106, 144; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 32, 87, 115, 172, 206.

community stores also served as social spaces where locals visited and kept abreast of the details of each others' lives.³³ It was near this center of each community that one of the more exciting regular events occurred: the arrival of the mail boat, making its rounds three days per week. Unable to enter the tidal creeks astride the banks, the mail boat would anchor offshore and someone charged with the task would shove off in a smaller boat to unload the day's delivery. It was on the mail boat that many visitors arrived at the banks, and it also connected villagers to the national marketplace by the early 20th century through the mail order catalogs of Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward.³⁴

The two major forms of employment on the Carolina banks from the 1870s to the 1930s were the Lifesaving Service, after 1915 the Coast Guard, and commercial fishing, while many also made significant income from waterfowl hunting. The Coast Guard (hereafter synonymous with the Lifesaving Service for simplicity) shaped village life as much as the commercial orientation toward the sounds. The Coast Guard became the primary source from which banks villagers received regular pay, and Guard service increasingly played a more prominent role in village life. Congress funded the proliferation of Lifesaving Stations along the North Carolina coast in response to the 1877 *USS Huron* wreck north of Hatteras Island, which exposed the continued dangers of the North Carolina coast, and within a decade each community had at least one Lifesaving Station nearby, often manned by locals. In 1880, about seven percent of islanders found employment in government service; by 1920 about one quarter of the population earned federal checks. Most families, in other words, had

³³ "Oldest Grocery Store on Hatteras Island," *Sea Chest*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Summer 1974), 16-20; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 65-66, 119-119, 207, 238, 300. Hatteras village, through private enterprise, got an ice plant and electric generator a decade before other villages had access to electricity.

³⁴ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 40-41, 68, 130.

one or more active or retired members in the Coast Guard in the early twentieth century, and the presence of the Lifesaving Service led to noticeable population increases before 1900.³⁵ The Coast Guard was more than an economic boon to banks residents; it also helped shape social organization locally. With their steady pay, Guardsman along the banks were considered “big livers,” and the Lifesaving keeper, heading the crew at a given station, became the most politically influential person in the village, a type of community leader. In Buxton and Avon, villagers voted to elect men to this coveted position that became quite politicized by the 1920s.³⁶ In a society lacking class distinctions and local governing bodies, the Coast Guard became an institution for organizing authority among villagers.

Most banks residents were fishermen or the wives and children of fishermen. While the presence of federal service was critical to the shaping of local societies, it was commercial fishing around which those societies were most intimately constructed. The life of a waterman was so ingrained in the banks culture that those who did not take to seafaring life were somewhat ostracized as men who had “refused the sea.”³⁷ Most time not fishing islanders spent prepping boats or tying, setting, and repairing nets. Outside of Sundays, there was little time away from laboring for a living. As one old time fisherman who remembered fishing with his grandfather at the age of ten put it, “If you didn’t work, you didn’t eat.”³⁸ Subject to the whims of weather and the seasonal spawning and feeding cycles of particular fishes, the life of a fisherman was anything but certain. Days of work sometimes ended in failure, and when a hurricane came through equipment repairs could hinder activity for

³⁵ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 87-88; MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 214-215.

³⁶ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 53, 158-161; Willard Gray, interview by Susan West, Avon, NC, (2004?), National Park Service, Outer Banks Oral History Library, Outer Banks History Center, 521.

³⁷ MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 208-209.

³⁸ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 94.

weeks. Once successfully loaded with a catch, fishermen made their way back to the fish houses that were constructed on stilts offshore in the sounds, accessible through an opening in the floor. At the fish house, buyers, mostly from Elizabeth City and Norfolk, would bid on the fish based on prices determined beforehand, and the fisherman would transfer his catch to a “buy boat” destined for urban markets. Often for all of his labor the returns on a fisherman’s catch amounted to little more than a subsistence wage.³⁹

Every member in fishermen’s families contributed to the commercial enterprise. Nathaniel Bishop noted in 1874 what he found to be peculiar gender constructions resulting from the collective enterprise. The women he encountered at Ocracoke, Bishop wrote, “can pull a pretty good stroke, and frequently assist their husbands in the fisheries.”⁴⁰ But if Banks women challenged Bishop’s conceptions of the feminine through the “masculine” work they performed (he was also surprised that they frequently dipped snuff), both labor and space among banks societies became divided along gender lines. Women kept the homestead. Outside of what might be typified as women’s work—the domestic chores of cooking, cleaning, hauling water, and raising children—women also tied and mended the 300- to 400-yard cotton nets, gathered wood, gardened, tended to chickens and perhaps milk cows, gathered shellfish, and packed and salted mullet. Men mostly fished. They would also gather with groups of villagers when collective labor was needed, such as to build a house, to round up animals, or to lime everyone’s nets each Saturday to prevent molding, but fishing boats remained individuated and small. Fishing was a personal, if social, endeavor. Children were

³⁹*Ibid.*, 42, 182, 253. Ice was delivered to the fish houses after 1900 in 330-lb blocks to keep fish fresh. The offshore fish houses remained until the Army Corps dredged artificial channels in Ocracoke, Hatteras, Rodanthe, and Avon between 1931 and 1946, allowing boats laden with fish to dock alongshore.

⁴⁰ Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 193, 197, 201.

trained early on to learn their roles in village life; girls helped with “women’s work” and boys fished with their male relatives. One of the most striking differences in the many oral histories conducted with villagers was the consistently different ways that men and women remembered their childhoods in the 1910s-1930s. Male interviewees remembered having “total and absolute freedom” to run around on the islands unsupervised during a time when “there were no strangers to be concerned with about your children.” Women on the other hand remembered strict time constraints for visiting other girls and a childhood full of difficult chores.⁴¹

Space was also gender-specific. As popular writer and amateur historian Ben Dixon MacNeill put it in the 1950s, “These islands, and the villages on them, are a pure matriarchy. The wives . . . are mistresses of whatever there is, of their houses, of their children and, when they come home, of their husbands. No man who has given himself to the sea is quite ever the master of his own household.”⁴² But women, though they helped their husbands prepare in the fisheries, were typically not seafarers. Fishing was an exclusively male activity and the boat was a male space. In pursuit of lucrative fish runs, fishermen often set up temporary camps at various sites along the islands or on nearby sound-side islands, where they stayed for up to a week at a time fishing and delivering their catch to a nearby fish house, and playing cards and drinking in the evening among a small group of locals. The individualism that often characterized fishermen, at least on the banks, extended to their relationships with

⁴¹ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 36, 84, 90-91, 142, 176, 203. Quote is from page 90. The villager’s identity is not provided; David Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001), 62. Cecelski claims that women often fished alongside their husbands. Certainly there were exceptions, but the assertion that it was typical is contrary to what Ben Dixon MacNeill and others have said of banks societies in the early 20th century.

⁴² MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 209-210.

their wives. As they shoved off in pursuit of a living, fishermen returned to a comfortable place, to the open sea, which MacNeill and many others described as “the great love of their lives.”⁴³

The outer banks landscape was not entirely the women’s sphere. Though women and children often foraged in the woods, islanders supplemented their diets by hunting, and men did the hunting. Hunting deer and rabbit in nearby woods was common, but islanders also fed on the animals they kept, maximizing the productivity of the land by allowing livestock—mostly cattle and varying numbers of sheep, horses, goats, and hogs—to freely range in forests and uninhabitable sections of the banks. Banks animals were not selectively bred, and though to Orville Wright the animals seemed “poor, pitiful-looking creatures,” they contributed much needed meat to local diets. Determining ownership and consuming the animals required a community effort. Men on horseback periodically rounded up the herds so that ownership could be determined and animals could be marked, usually by cutting the ear, or sheep could be sheared. Horses when rounded up were marked and, if there were buyers, ‘broken’ and sold to mainland farmers. Virginia agronomist Edmund Ruffin marveled at this practice and the “interesting festivals” that accompanied the bi-annual horse penning that he witnessed in the 1850s. Mainland farmers were the principal buyers of the undersized banks horses (often called “ponies” in the past several decades), and their presence turned the round-ups into large-scale social events.⁴⁴ Running free, the animals became feral. Horses

⁴³ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 230; MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 111, 208; Even in a recent interview with one of the few remaining commercial fishermen in 2007 conducted by the author, Dale Farrow described fishing as his “first love.” Dale Farrow, interview by author, Buxton, NC, 15 April 2007.

⁴⁴ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 97, 216; Edmund Ruffin, *Agricultural, Geological, and Descriptive Sketches of Lower North Carolina and the Similar Adjacent Lands*, (Raleigh: Institution for the Deaf & Dumb & the Blind, 1861), 130-131.

had to be broken to be sold, often by running them into the ocean and jumping on them while in the water, and cattle and hogs had to be tracked and shot. Distributing meat usually involved the community. Village men gathered and slaughtered their hogs in autumn as a collective effort, for which they smoked the various cuts, poured cooking lard into 5-gallon buckets, and distributed shares among those contributing. More regularly during the winter someone would “kill a beef.” Lacking refrigeration, those downing their cattle took what meat they wanted and sold the rest locally. Other villagers would later reciprocate the offer of fresh meat.⁴⁵ If harvesting fish for market separated men’s and women’s domains, harvesting animals for consumption functioned to bring the community closer together.

Islanders did not own most of the land they used. Prior to the 1870s the state owned most of the land outside of the villages. Increasingly, sports hunters migrated to the banks to take advantage of the enormous flocks of migrating waterfowl hungry for the salt marsh vegetation that proliferated near the banks in Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds, and their presence resulted in great land purchases. Where locals could take advantage of anticipated interest in certain areas, they bought land from the state for \$1.50 per acre and sold each acre at \$7.00 or \$8.00. In the last three decades of the 19th century and the first twenty years of the 20th century wealthy speculators who founded gun clubs for urban sportsmen purchased more than 80% of the very cheap banks land outside of the villages.⁴⁶ Despite the change in ownership, hunters used only limited space along the sound shore, and villagers continued to use the land in traditional ways, as a type of informal commons. Livestock ranged across the

⁴⁵ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 43, 72-73, 147, 186, 217, 328.

⁴⁶ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 71; J.S. Holmes, “Report on the ‘Banks’ of Dare County, North Carolina,” North Carolina State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, Dare Coast 1933 folder; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 119.

islands unabated. When fishermen set up temporary fish camps, they did so without the consent of the actual proprietor, whether the state or later a club owner. They left nets in the camps without fear of theft or vandalism. When fishermen fished the surf along the ocean front, they would leave their catch along the beach and continue working until the end of the day when they would transport their earnings to the fish house. Land use was largely informal and communal. Outside of home plots, which usually contained a garden, a chicken coop, and maybe a milk cow or two, bounded by a fence, most land along the banks continued to be used collectively and informally well into the twentieth century.⁴⁷ Out of necessity to wrest an adequate living from a very limiting landscape, islanders relied on unregulated space.

Though banks societies were shaped by government projects at various levels and villagers depended on the nearby federal presence for regular pay, islanders strongly resisted government regulation in the early twentieth century. By the turn of the century, conservation activists within North Carolina sought to curtail harvests in declining fisheries and to outlaw the shooting of dwindling waterfowl species through state legislation. In the case of fisheries, conservationists saw two major problems: oystermen were destroying sound bottoms through dredging and fishermen choked the sounds with stationary pound nets, especially in the narrowed lanes on either side of Roanoke Island, preventing shad from migrating into Albemarle Sound rivers to spawn in numbers sufficient to reproduce their populations. The state created a North Carolina Fish Commission in 1907 to deal with both issues, and legislation quickly followed. Most coastal counties, however, lobbied to be excluded from

⁴⁷ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 116; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 215-216, 230, 292.

the legislation until a new Fisheries Commission was given state-wide jurisdiction in 1915. To prevent the overhunting of marketable waterfowl, a North Carolina branch of the Audubon Society incorporated in 1903 and the legislature passed an Audubon Law that same year to limit and regulate the hunting season, and to prevent the practice of firelighting, for which game wardens began patrolling the coast.⁴⁸

Residents across the coastal counties actively resisted this legislation, protesting that regulation would ruin their ability to make a living. As Orville Wright observed during his stay, “The people about Kitty Hawk are all ‘game hogs’ and pay little respect to what few game laws they have.” For several years following regulatory legislation, many fishermen continued to dredge and set nets where they chose. Game wardens trying to prevent the shooting of wildfowl were sent on a fool’s errand. In case after case, coastal county judges refused to convict the violators that wardens prosecuted. In one instance, a man illegally hunting ducks at night shot the warden with birdshot in the face, hands, and body. The warden chased the violator until he recognized the hunter, yet still could not get a conviction. In 1909, fifty-two North Carolina counties repealed the Audubon Law, which was finally superseded by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 that prevented the market hunting of migratory waterfowl. Hunting in the North Carolina tidelands was afterward left to the more easily regulated sportsmen. Islanders conceded to regulatory bodies over wildlife resources only gradually, and after much resistance.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ John R. Ross, “The North Carolina Geological Survey, 1891-1920,” *Forest History*, vol. 16 (1973), 23-27; Mark Taylor, “Seiners and Tongers: North Carolina Fisheries in the Old and New South,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 69 (Jan. 1992), 31-33.

⁴⁹ McFarland, *Papers of Wilber and Orville Wright*, 31; Kathleen Carter, “Terrapins, Oysters and Shad: Preserving the Fisheries of Pamlico Sound, 1880-1910,” unpublished, David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center, 10-14, 17-21; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 72; Thomas Gilbert Pearson, *Adventures in Bird Protection*,

The effort to regulate sound waters and marshland in North Carolina preceded by about a decade a state-wide “war” on cattle ticks. As part of a national USDA effort to eradicate carriers of bovine tuberculosis beginning in 1906, federal agents built concrete dipping vats along the banks in 1920 and demanded that villagers round up and dip all cattle bi-weekly during the summer. Proponents of the nationwide operation reasoned that the cost of quarantining and dipping cattle was ultimately less than the cost to production of the spreading tick-borne diseases, thus warranting federal enforcement for producers’ own good. Coastal counties again became notorious among North Carolinians for local resistance. Islanders responded first by dynamiting the concrete vats, only to repair them apparently under threat of prosecution. When agents came to oversee dips in the first years of the program, villagers passively resisted by refusing to participate.⁵⁰ After finally compelling villagers to contribute to the federal effort, many of the animals proved too feral to be corralled into pens. The free-roaming cattle on the banks formed into “gangs” of 15-30 heads, and gangs responded differently to humans. Those that fed mostly on sound-side grasses were more domesticated and could be driven, but gangs grazing largely in the woods and swamps acted like wild animals. Ben Spencer of Ocracoke remembered that “One or two horses were gored that was trying to pen them. Several of the men were run up trees.” In cooperation, the county offered villagers five dollars a head to shoot any cattle that could not

(New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1937), 119. Pearson was the most influential figure in the NC Audubon Society and worked tirelessly for bird protection. In this autobiographical account about that effort, Pearson laments the inability to get convictions for violations and recounts the story of the hunter shooting the warden.

⁵⁰ Robert S. Curtis, *The History of Livestock in North Carolina*, (Raleigh, NC: Agricultural Experimental Station, North Carolina State College, 1956), 32-38; MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 69-70.

be dipped, and locals eliminated about two-thirds of the nearly 400 cattle in Dare County before the USDA declared the area tick-free after the 1924 season.⁵¹

The cattle tick eradication program marked a changing and significant trend for banks livestock. Tick eradication linked banks cattle, which were consumed only locally, to the commercially produced cattle of large ranching industries. Connected ecologically by one of the major limitations of large-scale livestock production—widespread disease—banks cattle were additionally linked to those industrial markets through government management. Resource use on peripheral spaces like the outer banks came increasingly to be determined, through governmental mediation, by uses elsewhere. This initial thinning of the herds on the banks also became the precedent for fully eliminating the ranging livestock a decade later in the remaking of the banks landscape, largely with visions of a seashore park. The state outlawed free-ranging stock on Hatteras Island in 1935; the last semi-feral cow was shot in 1938.⁵²

Islanders depended less on cattle in the early twentieth century than in previous eras, but eliminating cattle changed banks societies. Many families, though a minority, kept one or

⁵¹ Ben Spencer, interview by Micheal V. Wurm, Ocracoke, NC, 10 June 1974, National Park Service, Outer Banks Oral History Library, Outer Banks History Center, 14; Cyrus Ruffman Gray, interview by Amy Glass, Buxton, NC, 9 July 1988, National Park Service and UNC Southern Oral History Program, David Stick Library, CALO Oral History Project, Outer Banks History Center, 11-13; Curtis, *Livestock in North Carolina*, 36-37; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, vol. VI, part II, "Agriculture," (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1922), 244, lists 371 total cattle in Dare County in 1920, 265 of which were beef cattle and 106 dairy cattle. The 1930 census lists 137 cattle total in Dare County, including 56 kept for milk production and 44 kept for beef (apparently limiting subcategories to adults?). *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, "Agriculture," vol. II, part II, "The Southern States," (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 392. Dare County is cited here because it consisted mostly of the northern banks from Nags Head south to Hatteras village, plus Roanoke Island and a large and mostly uninhabited swampy area of the mainland. Statistics are only broken down by county, and Hyde County, which contains Ocracoke, mostly consists of mainland settlements and thus does not provide a good indication of the fluctuating livestock numbers specific to Ocracoke.

⁵² *Public Laws and Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly at Its Session of 1935*, (Raleigh: Mitchell Print Co., 1935), 287, Chapter 263; MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 70. Ocracoke, which was in Hyde county, maintained ranging stock until the National Park outlawed them in the early 1950s.

two cows penned near the house for milking, and unlike the herds of feral animals, the family cow usually had a name. When one's cows had calves, the cow's owner sold or traded milk to other villagers, and milk was an important food, especially for the young. One Buxton man emphasized that the children in early 20th century Buxton "were all raised from the cows."⁵³ The significance of cattle to villagers' lives was evident in their traditional celebration of Old Christmas, a carry over of the Epiphany and the 12 days of Christmas, and villagers incorporated cows in the religious ritual. Old Christmas was celebrated in Rodanthe on January 5th ("Twelfth Night Eve), and was mostly observed by villagers in the three northernmost Hatteras Island villages that made up Chicamacomico, though other Hatteras villagers were welcome to attend. The celebration began at midnight when participants gathered on the beach, as Virginia Midgett recorded, to watch "the weird action of the cattle . . . (which) would fall on their knees . . . and make low murmuring noises as if they were praying." When Old Christmas began, villagers marched in procession playing fifes and drums on their way to enjoy the great feast that the women had been preparing over several days. The highlight of the evening was the arrival of Old Buck, a mythological bull supposed to reside in the Cape Woods near Frisco—and actually played by two adult men donning a costume—who would run around wildly and supposedly torment children who had misbehaved.⁵⁴ Though the Old Buck legend continued to be a part of Old Christmas celebrations throughout the 20th century, the destruction of the cattle in the 1930s in many

⁵³ Cyrus Ruffman Gray interview, 10; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 146.

⁵⁴ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 44-50; Virginia Midgett, "The Story of Old Christmas: John and Pat Herbert of Rodanthe Tell How Old Buck Became a Legend," *Sea Chest*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1979), 37; Jan DeBlieu, "Old Christmas," in *An Outer Banks Reader*, ed. David Stick, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 287-297.

ways marked the end of an era, of a long-standing way of using and creating a livelihood from the barrier island landscape.

Old Christmas was also one of the strongest cultural expressions that separated islanders into sub-groups. Its celebration was unique to Rodanthe. If outer banks cultures seemed to share similar expressions and ways of relating to each other and to the land and sea, it was the peculiarities of the each village that locals noticed. The “clannishness” of the different villages has already been noted, and each village recognized themselves as a distinct people in relation to the other villages. Distinctions were always relational, divided on Hatteras Island between “uproaders” and “downroaders.” Often villagers characterized one another by the products of local industries. Hatteras village, nearest to a deep and dependable inlet, was largely a fishing village, least dependent on the Coast Guard, and was considered more cosmopolitan than other Hatteras Island societies. Avon, or Kinnakeet, near a forest of plentiful live oak and cedar, was best known for boat building, for yaupon tea production, and it was the center of the eel grass industry, for which islanders harvested and bailed a common marsh grass to be used as stuffing for the shipping of furniture and mattresses. Frisco was also known for producing yaupon. Chicamacomico families were dominated by Midgetts, and Midgetts were well known for their heroism in the Coast Guard. Village rivalries manifested in the derisive names other islanders used to describe particular societies: due to the large numbers of goats in their woods, Buxton residents were called “Goaters;” down the road, where insects bred prolifically, villagers were called “Frisco Ticks;” and it was well known that anyone in the 1920s or 1930s employing the scornful refrain “Kinnakeeters, yaupon eaters!”, well after yaupon drinking had gone out of style elsewhere

on Hatteras, was looking for a fight. These rivalries were expressed in daily interaction, but they most clearly boiled over during the Old Christmas celebration, which was notorious for its brawls. By all accounts, young men would drink, take out their frustrations on a rival during the Christmas celebration, and by the next morning be good friends.⁵⁵

When hurricanes or northeasters arrived, the storms' brutality eclipsed all rivalries. For all of the bickering and "clannish" behavior that locals noticed, their societies were inevitably connected by the necessities involved in living on a barrier island. In part, that meant dealing with the limits of the land and exploiting the new possibilities in larger markets and government service. It also meant dealing with coastal disasters. The former united them in purpose, but divided them into rivalries; the latter brought them together.

The energy regime along the coast forced islanders to interact responsively with their environment, and storm experiences showed this most clearly. Those who grew up on the banks in the early twentieth century remembered that locals possessed an acute awareness of the sky, and of the sound of the ocean. The ocean, many said, would talk to you. Before radar warning systems, one could hear the intense cracking of a wave or read the sky and know that a storm lay just out of sight. They also looked at the behavior of animals, such as fiddler crabs heading for high ground. Islanders did the same. They build houses on elevated land, sometimes stayed with neighbors on higher ground, and those owning cars beginning in the 1920s drove them to hillcrests to weather the storm.⁵⁶ Banks villagers lived reactively to the force of wind against water and sand. Islanders very rarely left their village. Instead, they

⁵⁵ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 47-50, 109-110, 148, 185, 202, 240; MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 100-102, 228; David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 233-234. According to MacNeill, of 37 Congressional Medals awarded for Lifesaving Service heroism on Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands, 19 were awarded to Midgetts.

⁵⁶ MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 115-116; *Ethnohistorical Description*, 98, 149, 332.

worked hard to prepare for storms, moving property to safety, stacking furniture inside their homes, and preparing for the limitations of the post-hurricane circumstance. Banks homes were set on blocks, and most had either plugs in the floors or removable floor boards to allow water to pass through without carrying the house away. Ocean surges often flowed into their homes, flowed through them, and sometimes carried houses off, but rarely blew them down. When storm waters washed houses away, villagers collected together and moved the house to its original spot using what they called the “bedway and roller system,” which meant laying planks in front of the house to create a “bed” and rolling the house on logs, pulled by horses. By the early 20th century, locals had learned to control the land for gardens, homesteads, and raising livestock, but also to react with resignation to great energies beyond their control. Orville Wright noted a similar reaction in Kitty Hawk in the face of a massive sand dune threatening local houses. Menaced periodically by both land and sea, moving homes was a long-established strategy along the banks. As far as locals were concerned, when wind against sand or sea threatened to destroy their homes, there was nothing to it but to pick up and relocate.⁵⁷

Nothing changed banks societies more than transportation. Transportation framed the ways the islanders related to the land and to each other, and later transformations of the landscape were linked to the anticipated paving of roads and the proliferation of cars. In 1900, villagers relied almost exclusively on boats, and horses facilitated overland travel. They employed horse carts, but the carts usually carried goods, not people. Boats were personalized. Every man owned his own skiff, hand-made and sufficiently customized that

⁵⁷ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 44, 151, 228, 269.

locals could recognize each other from great distance. Before cars reduced the relational space on the banks, villages seemed very far apart; Ocracoke was a distant land. Automobiles changed that sense of space.⁵⁸

Ben Dixon MacNeill called the invention of the pneumatic tire, which enabled cars to drive along the sandy outer banks, “the Great Divide between the times that were and the times that are.”⁵⁹ MacNeill had witnessed the automobile revolution on the outer banks. Cars were very rare before the mid-1920s, but the 1930s and 1940s marked the first phase of cars on the banks—the era of sand driving. There were no roads. One drove along the beach at low tide, farther up on what was called the “bank of the beach” during high tide, or meandered through the midland flats any way one could. Eventually, drivers dug a basic road. One had to let the air out of the tires to drive in sand, and everyone frequently got stuck. Most villagers did not own cars until the state built a paved road in the early 1950s, but they could use automobile transportation after 1938 when Stockton Midgett of Rodanthe founded a “bus” line running the length of Hatteras Island to Manteo, which connected to the northern banks by a private ferry service that began in 1924.⁶⁰

Driving helped to change banks societies. In the 1930s, Chicamacomico schools consolidated as Buxton school had earlier consolidated with Frisco. Hatteras village possessed an electric generator in 1937, a full decade before any other village had electricity, and cars turned Hatteras into a social center for other islanders, where they found a movie house and a pavilion for island-wide dances by the late 1930s. Automobile transportation

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 36, 124, 247, 294.

⁵⁹ MacNeill, *Hatterasman*, 239.

⁶⁰ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 36-39, 73, 226; David Stick, “Toby Tillett and His Ferry,” *The State*, (June 18, 1949), 5.

helped to change islanders' sense of themselves in relation to one another. But driving without paved roads was inefficient. According to the Midgetts who ran the Hatteras bus, a round trip from Manteo to Hatteras village took 8-10 hours. The bus frequently buried in sand, and riders were often forced to pass nights under the stars. Prior to paved roads, natural cycles mattered. The best driving was on the compacted sand at low tide, and unlike mainland conditions cars got better traction after a steady rain. Sand and salt air also brutalized engines. As a result, local newspapers already by the late 1920s began making new demands on the state—to pave a road traversing Hatteras Island.⁶¹

That road finally came in the 1950s, and it drastically transformed island culture, economics, and politics. The automobile revolution on the outer banks, however, extended from technological and economic changes elsewhere, and it was most directly linked to the new politics of the northern banks in the 1920s. While islanders continued to make a living from the land in much the same way as they had for over 50 years and tried to adapt automobiles to serve those ends, it was those outsiders seeking to make the banks productive by parceling and selling it to other outsiders who helped to bring the road that villagers supposed desirable.

Wasteland into Gold: the Marketing of the Shore

The outer banks had a long history of tourism by the time the Wright Brothers arrived. As early as 1795, Jonathan Price said of Ocracoke that “This healthy spot is in autumn the resort of many of the inhabitants of the main.” Most of these temporary

⁶¹ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 32, 39, 73, 122, 172, 211, 239; W.O. Saunders, “Road to Cape Henry from Cape Lookout,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 24 June 1927.

inhabitants came from New Bern and Washington to this village constructed around piloting, and visitors found lodging among the local residents willing to rent out space in their homes. Though one family owned a small motel called the Pamlico Inn in the early-to-mid-twentieth century, until the state built a road across the island in the late 1950s accommodations in Ocracoke never grew beyond this scale. After the Civil War the Currituck area became a popular resort for wealthy northern sports hunters as well, what conservationist leader T. Gilbert Pearson later called “another class of men,” to distinguish them from the market hunters for whom he had little love. Gun clubs were created to accommodate sportsmen, using locals as guides and bringing a great deal of external revenue to the state. Clubs proliferated on the Currituck Banks, though proprietors also constructed them at Bodie Island, Pea Island, and Duck Island as bases for sportsmen operating down the banks.⁶²

Apart from Ocracoke and Currituck, Albemarle planters also created a popular local resort at the northerly fishing village of Nags Head, and it is from the Nags Head area that tourism later expanded. Beginning in the early 1830s, wealthy planters from the upper Albemarle area began sailing down the sound tributaries and to the banks to spend their summers. The earliest visitors came to Nags Head to escape the “miasmas,” or noxious vapors, from mainland peaty soils that seemed to cause “agues” and “bilious fevers,” which for many living along in the tidewater area were an assumed part of the seasonal cycle. The real vector, we know now, was the anopheles mosquito, which thrives in wetlands like those of the coastal plain. Human agency probably exacerbated the problem. Albemarle farmers

⁶² Jonathan Price, “A Description of Occacock Inlet,” reprinted in *North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1926), 625; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 38, 71; Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 161; Pearson, *Adventures*, 123.

commonly dammed streams and tributaries for water mills in the early nineteenth century, and by the 1830s stagnant mill ponds proliferated, creating prime breeding ground for the insects. Perhaps this helped convince some planters that an alternative summer environment was needed. Planters believed that the salt air of the banks and the salt water of the ocean were fresh and cleansing, a remedy for the bad summer air of the coastal plain, a “healthy spot,” as Price said of Ocracoke. There was probably some justification to the relocation; the banks were cooler and particularly windy, which would have been an improvement over conditions in the tidelands. What differentiated Nags Head from Ocracoke was that visitors bought the land and constructed their own cabins there. Though at first only a few families came to Nags Head, others soon followed and quickly colonized the small fishing village with a large hotel and several cottages. For those inhabiting the islands temporarily, the banks came to have a distinct meaning. The relatively wealthy visitors transformed the place into a resort that by the late 1840s was an exclusive, elite cultural space for hundreds of planters bearing little resemblance—at least during the summer—to life elsewhere on the outer banks.⁶³

Unfortunately, like much of the islands’ history, sources on the early conditions of Nags Head are rather scarce. The most thorough account of Nags Head during the late 1840s is a novel, but it is by all accounts a thinly veiled journal of two months stay at the resort.⁶⁴

⁶³ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 95-100; Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 38; George Higby Throop, *Nag’s Head and Bertie: Two Novels by George Higby Throop*, facsimile reproduction, (Charlotte: Heritage House, 1958), 46-47, 80-81; Regarding the assumption of sickness as part of the experience in the Albemarle area, Throop quotes one resident as saying in response to his inquiry about common sicknesses in the area, “Bless your heart, my dear sir, *it’s nothing at all but the chills and fever! We’re RAISED on it here!* I’m rather *partial* to chill, myself!” (his italics) pp. 76; Mosquitoes and mill ponds are discussed in Kirby, *Poquosin*, 135-139.

⁶⁴ Richard Walser, “The Mysterious Case of George Higby Throop (1818-1896); or, The Search for the Author of the Novels *Nag’s Head*, *Bertie*, and *Lynde Weiss*,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, (Jan.

George Higby Throop's *Nag's Head: or, Two Months Among "the Bankers"* describes a beach resort that, though apparently established for reasons of health, soon grew rich in social purpose as a recreational space for wealthy Albemarle families. By the time of Throop's visit, less than twenty years after the first planter spent his summer at the village, Nags Head abounded with options for daily recreation and enjoyment. The hotel built there in the late 1830s, along with the nearby chapel, was the center of the seasonal community, hosting a variety of events. "The mornings were spent at the bowling alley, in fishing, or fox-hunting," Throop explained, "The dinner and the siesta occupied the afternoon; and tea and the toilet occupied the time until a venerable negro, after a few preliminary turns of the screws, gave forth the startling, thrilling, life-awakening notes of his favorite violin," and a lively dance ensued. It was in this pleasant, relaxing—exclusively Anglo-Saxon— atmosphere that young couples met, friendships were forged, and people like Throop found inspiration to pen a poetic verse.⁶⁵

Nags Head was a place reserved for certain people with particular values, and summer residents expressed their status outwardly. A writer for *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* wrote in 1860 of his recent excursion to Nags Head that "Fashion and frolic hold revel . . . among the two or three hundred guests was a full share of female loveliness."

Writing of his first visit to the chapel, Throop was more specific: "There was the usual rustle

1956), 11-14, 20. Walser thoroughly discusses the nature of Higby Throop's work, as well as the true identity of the author, as the book was originally published under the pseudonym "Gregory Seaworthy"; E. C. Bruce, "Lounging in the Footprints of the Pioneers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 20, no. 120, (May 1859), 728-729. Note that Throop spelled Nags Head with a possessive "s" as Nag's Head. This was the standard title at the time and Nags Headers later dropped the apostrophe.

⁶⁵ Catherine W. Bishir, *The "Unpainted Aristocracy": The Beach Cottages of Old Nags Head*, second printing (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1980), 6-9; Throop, *Nag's Head*, 47. Nags Headers from the 1900s to the early twentieth century were always serviced by slaves and free blacks, and then poor black servants. The assertion here that it was an exclusively Anglo-Saxon atmosphere is meant in the sense that it was whites who created and controlled that cultural space, and that the place they created was exclusive.

of silks and flutter of fans, and turning of heads; and, but for the side structure in which we were seated, I might quite easily have imagined myself in Trinity Church in New York.”⁶⁶ Nags Head vacationers brought to the shores the social pretensions of Albemarle’s landed gentry. What a contrast, indeed, summer vacationers must have made with the poverty-stricken islanders, given the general destitution along coastal settlements before even the commercialization of the sounds.

One of the most revealing aspects of Throop’s novel is, indeed, his treatment of locals. Despite the book’s subtitle, *Two Months Among “the Bankers”*, there is hardly any mention of local people, local culture, or anything outside of the exclusive community at Nags Head. “Bankers” in Throop’s work were mostly faceless, backward, poverty-stricken people who seemed to showed up in numbers at the first sign of a shipwreck to see what they could procure. Even when a local woman made the warm and generous offer of her home to one of Throop’s storytellers for two weeks following a shipwreck, the character dismissed his host who, wearing a hood, had approached him so kindly: “The removal of the hood revealed to us—not a very handsome, certainly, but decidedly a fine face. The figure and dress and manner were unexceptionable. We remained there a fortnight.” Near the end of his book, Throop seemed to realize the irony of leaving the bankers out of his story, and he aimed to rectify the omission with a final section entitled “the bankers.” Unfortunately for the curious, locals still received light treatment.

To say the truth, I know but little of them. True, I know that they are the landholders along [the banks] . . . I have seen them mending their nets, I have chatted with them, and yet I know but little of their character and habits. My friend Dr. A____ tells me that many of them are miserably poor and that he not unfrequently prescribes . . .

⁶⁶ Throop, *Nag’s Head*, 38-39, 47; E.C. Bruce, “Footprints of the Pioneers,” 429.

simply a little wholesome food. Many of them, he informs me, have most singular prejudices concerning medicine . . . Altogether, they seem to be a peculiar people. They are isolated from the social intercourse, which, in the more densely-peopled communities of the mainland, refines and elevates the individual. They look very jealously, *I am told*, upon strangers; but are clannish, and therefore honest and social among themselves.”⁶⁷

Outside of a couple quick anecdotes from his characters, this is all the description Throop affords those who graced his title, a portrayal quite different from the inviting folk that Nathaniel Bishop met in 1874 as he traversed the banks in his paper canoe. Throop’s silence and his ignorance about his neighbors that summer perhaps says as much about the cultural sphere of Nags Head than anything he wrote in his novel.

Later, locals from the village of Nags Head and as far away as Kitty Hawk regularly brought carts loaded with homemade produce for sale to the summer residents, which facilitated a greater degree of interaction. The resort nevertheless remained dependent on great quantities of outside sources of food and material goods to maintain the lifestyle that proper planter families expected. Not only did Nags Headers usually have to obtain wood to build their houses; families carried along everything they needed to turn their cottages into temporary homes. As Throop detailed the process in his day, Nags Headers brought with them “the plainer and more common articles of household furniture, one or more horses, a cow, and such vehicles as are fitted for use on sandy roads . . . (a buggy, or more often a cart). One, two, sometimes half a dozen servants accompany the family.” The stress of gathering up the “thousand and one articles of furniture” and other household items each summer before the excursion must have been immense. Upon arrival, families faced the

⁶⁷ Throop, *Nag’s Head*, 71, 115-116, 162-163. Italics added.

problem of procuring food for themselves, servants, and any horses, cows, or dogs they may have brought. “[I]nasmuch as nothing can be cultivated here, [and] . . . As fresh vegetables are almost indispensable,” Throop told his readers, “it is of great importance, too, that the intercourse between Nag’s Head and *home* should be constant and regular. It is this that sustains some three or four packets, which run usually twice a-week” during the summer season. The packets, then, provided not only necessarily imported foods, but also a connection to what the visitors saw as “home.” Throop clarified that the packets connected them not with the plantation or any other farm, but to several nearby cities, to urban markets, to “civilization.”⁶⁸ It was the market connection that for Throop was home, not any particular place as such.

Nathaniel Bishop rowed past Nags Head twenty-five years after Throop. From the canoe, the resort looked quite different. “The large buildings of the hotels of Nag’s Head on the beach rose up as boldly to the eye as a fortification,” Bishop wrote. “Nag’s Head Beach is a most desolate locality . . . A few fishermen have their homes on this dreary beach, but the village, with its one store, is a forlorn place.” How very dissimilar this description seems to all others. The resort was destroyed and the hotel torched during the Civil War, but the place soon rebounded. In August of 1867, the *Norfolk Journal* declared that Nags Head “has never been patronized more than during the last season,” and the resort continued to grow in importance throughout the nineteenth century. Bishop did not see a destroyed relict; he arrived out of season. The place was largely abandoned. Had he come seven months later,

⁶⁸ Edward Ralph Outlaw Jr., *Old Nag’s Head: Personal Recollections and Some History of the Region in North Carolina at the Edge of the Sea Where Our First Colonists Landed*, (Elizabeth City? NC: [s.n.], 1952), unpaginated; Throop, *Nag’s Head*, 15, 80-81.

Bishop would have seen a thriving resort much as Throop described, hosting a seasonal society joining together each night for music and dance, and donning the latest fashion.⁶⁹

Following the Civil War, planters reconstructed Nags Head, though with some significant changes. Most importantly, the physical orientation of the village began to change. Nags Head, both the resort and the small village of fishermen, like all other settlements on the outer banks, was located exclusively on the sound side. Beginning in 1884 “Nags Headers,” vacationing planters, began buying up the cheap, unproductive property on the ocean side of the island and placed 13 cottages near the shore by the turn of the century. Some they built too close. Edward Outlaw recalled that his family’s oceanfront cottage, the thirteenth of what were later dubbed the “unpainted aristocracy,” was threatened by the encroaching sea and, had to be moved twice by 1933 and a third time shortly thereafter.⁷⁰ Newcomers slowly learned what locals long assumed: building near the ocean courts disaster, and when the ocean challenges, you retreat. Aside from the physical danger of living near the ocean, these first moves toward (and then slightly away from) the beach represented Nags Headers’ primary uses for the banks—as a bathing beach—and they heralded developments to come.

Albemarle planters were able to construct the Nags Head resort in the 19th century and gun clubs proliferated along the banks because real estate value on this marginal land was relatively cheap. William Pool, who bought up the oceanfront property adjacent to Nags Head on which the 13 beach cottages sat, reportedly paid \$30 for 50 acres along the shore in

⁶⁹ Bishop, *Paper Canoe*, 163-164; Bishir, “*Unpainted Aristocracy*”, 10-18; The quote from the *Norfolk Journal* was published in Stick, *Outer Banks*, 106.

⁷⁰Outlaw, *Old Nag’s Head*, unpaginated; Bishir, “*Unpainted Aristocracy*”, 10-14.

1866.⁷¹ In the 1920s, the cost of available land on the banks remained low, and growing American affluence brought speculators to this marginal land who applied a new logic to the barrier shore. As Americans moved toward beaches in the post-WWI period, the aesthetic that made beach bathing attractive had deep roots in American culture. The appeals that boosters made for beach vacations which would have been familiar to Higby Throop, or to Henry David Thoreau who also wrote in the early 1850s about Cape Cod.⁷² But that aesthetic in the early 20th century could be made profitable in a new way: through speculation, development, and resale. Successfully promoting and, especially, creating new accessibility could turn the unproductive beaches—the islands' wastelands—into gold. Within a few decades, the old exclusive resort gave way to increasingly individualized ownership of beach property.

Many credited a native Kitty Hawker, Captain Dan Hayman, with initiating the speculative ventures on the north banks. Hayman, so the account goes, captained a yacht in Florida during the winter of early 1924, and there he witnessed the Florida real estate boom. Having made contacts among northeasterners during his years with the US Coastal Defense Service, Hayman returned to Kitty Hawk, received an option on 1,500 acres owned by his uncle, and began writing letters in search of financial backers to buy up tracts along the banks. Hayman made his first sale in August of 1926 to Frank Stick, then living in Interlaken, New Jersey, who was destined to be an important figure in the transformation of the banks. By March of 1927, with only a few thousand dollars to invest Hayman had sold

⁷¹ Outlaw, *Old Nag's Head*, unpaginated.

⁷² See Throop, *Nag's Head*; Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, (New York: Heritage Press, 1968).

over 30,000 acres of coastal property for around \$200,000 (sales thus averaging about \$65 per acre).⁷³

Frank Stick and his associates from New Jersey founded a development in early 1927 that they named the “Virginia Dare Shores” after Virginia Dare, the first English child among the Roanoke colonists born in the ‘New World’ and symbolic of claims that Roanoke was the “birthplace of English civilization” in America. Virginia Dare Shores was on the south side of Kitty Hawk Bay and consisted of several thousand acres of beachfront property, including the Kill Devil Hills site where the Wright Brothers experimented. By June of 1927, Stick was in the process of building a pair of hotels, but one-acre lots in the Virginia Dare Shores were only selling for between \$100 and \$1,000, compared to Virginia Beach, for instance, where developers sold lots for \$9,000 to \$50,000. The problem, as everyone knew, was access. In 1927 the banks could only be reached by boat. Unlike other recreational spaces long made accessible, the outer banks remained undeveloped precisely because railroads could not effectively connect them. Wilber Wright’s perilous journey across the sound, that last leg of his journey that took more than twice the time he spent travelling from Ohio to North Carolina, illustrated well the need for more efficient transportation. By the late 1920s, ferries shuffled people between Kitty Hawk and Point Harbor on the mainland, but developers needed something better. As the local Elizabeth City newspaper put it, “There can be no

⁷³ “When One Has an Idea and Keeps on Plugging: Capt. Dan Hayman Didn’t Have Money, But He Stuck to His Idea and the Money Came and is Still Coming,” Elizabeth City *Independent*, 11 March 1927.

great boom along the coast until the pleasure seekers and prospective investor can reach the coast by motor.”⁷⁴

Symptomatic of speculative ventures elsewhere, as in the era of railroad expansion, roads followed the land grab. In Kenneth Jackson’s definitive history of American Suburban growth, Jackson calls the proliferation of paved lanes in the 1920s “the road-building revolution,” intimately tied to the growth of licensed, car-owning Americans. Urbanites were able for the first time to travel quickly to and from peripheral areas, rendering cheap, attractive building land profitable, whether for suburban housing or for vacation homes. Wherever someone or some governmental body constructed a road, access to these outlying areas instantly raised the land value. As Jackson eloquently explained, “Every multi-lane ribbon of concrete was like the touch of Midas, transforming old pastures into precious property.”⁷⁵ Those interested in the young beach development, including W.O. Saunders, the editor of the local *Elizabeth City Independent* newspaper, counted on the automobile to annihilate space and decrease the relative distance between urban areas and this hinterland resort. “Millions May Reach (Kill Devil) Hills in a Day’s Journey,” ran a headline. The article continued: “If all of the people who live within a radius of 200 miles of Kill Devil Hills were to go there at one time, Kitty Hawk would have a population half as great as that

⁷⁴ “Just How Much is a Lot on the Ocean Worth?” *Elizabeth City, Independent*, 17 June 1927; “Plan 2 Hotels to be Built at Kill Devil Hill,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 11 February 1927; “Currituck Bridge is Having Hard Sledding,” *Elizabeth City, Independent*, 11 February 1927.

⁷⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 163, 175-176.

of New York City.”⁷⁶ But that sort of projection assumed direct, efficient roads, and Dare County had no roads, even on the mainland.

Washington Baum initiated Dare County road building. Elected county commissioner in 1924, Baum was given the unenviable task of heading what was by far the poorest county in North Carolina.⁷⁷ As commissioner, Baum’s job was to promote development, and he credited the newly invested in prompting him to initiate roads. “Some men from New Jersey came to Dare County about that time and started buying up land on the beach,” he explained. “One of them stayed at my place . . . [and he] Kept telling me Dare County had a wonderful future, if only we could get road and bridge connections so people could come down here. That’s when I began trying to figure out some way to get those roads and bridges.”⁷⁸ Baum’s plan was to build a bridge. Rejected by the State Highway Commission, he issued \$300,000 of county bonds, money the county did not have, to construct a toll bridge from Manteo, the county seat on Roanoke Island, to the northern banks below Nags Head. Extending from a dirt road on Roanoke Island and ending on the other side in loose sand, and connecting two islands, Baum’s project seemed a classic ‘bridge to nowhere.’ Many thought Wash Baum had ruined the county. But private investors soon took up the task of connecting the northern

⁷⁶ “Millions May Reach Hills in Day’s Journey,” Elizabeth City *Independent*, 29 April 1927. Saunders was very active in promoting beach development, but mostly to enhance the area and his home town of Elizabeth City. Though Saunders was not apparently invested in a beach development, he worked tirelessly to get infrastructure approved and to get a sizable Wright memorial. Saunders was also part of the Kitty Hawk Company (not a central figure) formed to build a Currituck Sound bridge and gave a small loan to the Wright Memorial Bridge Company, which finished the bridge, and which did purchase beach real estate. Saunders’ activism will be discussed below.

⁷⁷ Dare County citizens complained of having high taxes and the poorest county. According the to agricultural statistics in the 1920 federal census, the total value of all Dare County farms was \$184, 893, and second from the bottom was Tyrell County with \$1,989,292. The average county farm value for the state was \$12,501,670. In the same census, Dare came in last in total value of domestic animals, valued at \$18,628. Second from last was New Hanover County with \$154,325. The state county average in 1920 was \$1,112,953. *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 233-250.

⁷⁸ David Stick interviewed Wash Baum and quotes him in length in his book, *Outer Banks*, 243.

banks to the mainland by a second bridge, and the State Highway Commission built a road connecting those bridges, which was dubbed the “Virginia Dare Trail.”⁷⁹ The infrastructural expansion that Baum helped initiate were wrapped up in the promotional efforts of beach development and, as the name of Stick’s development and the new state road suggested, that development marketed the place by making new claims on the meaning of the past.

Though developing the banks rested on the transformative effects of one type of revolutionary transportation technology, it was the invention of another such technology—the airplane—that boosters embraced to market the place to tourists by creating a Wright Brothers Memorial. By 1920, the Wright brothers had been long gone from Kitty Hawk and largely forgotten. After widespread acclaim following their first flight in 1903, Wilber and Orville faded into relative obscurity. That is, until World War I. Were it not for the experience of the so-called Great War, and the nationally manufactured consent and enthusiasm for waging military campaigns in Europe, the Wright brothers may have remained minor figures. But the American wartime experience did two things that framed the claims promoters made in the late 1920s. First, the war legitimated and helped to further develop the airplane as a useful transportation and military technology. American media in the postwar period popularized the airplane, creating such cultural icons as Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh, whose celebrity, and the marketable value of that fame, caused politicians and beach developers in North Carolina to re-imagine the claims that could be

⁷⁹ David Stick, *Outer Banks*, 244-246; “They All Take Off Their Hats to Wash Baum,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 2 September 1927. There are two things to note here. First, the “Virginia Dare Trail” also continued across the northern Albemarle counties and was not exclusive to the banks. Rather, the road so designated helped open the Albemarle region generally. Second, calling the north banks an “island” is an admitted simplification. I call the northern banks an island because it was inaccessible by car without bridges or ferries, and its geographical category fluctuated between island and peninsula into the 1930s, when Currituck Inlet opened and then closed for the last time (to this writing).

made locally concerning the Wright brothers' successful experiments. Second, by mobilizing all sections of the United States around the rallying cry of patriotism, the war helped to lessen the sectional divide and to nationalize the South, what George Tindall has called a process of "Americanization." Honoring the invention of two Ohioan brothers was a national appeal to an imagined shared heritage. Those promoting a memorial to the Wrights hoped to transcend boundaries, inviting urbanites from north, south, and west alike to visit this "shrine" celebrating American ingenuity.⁸⁰

The effort to create a memorial to the Wright brothers on the outer banks was intimately connected with efforts to develop and promote the barrier beaches and nearby communities. Possibly at newspaperman W.O. Saunders' suggestion, but more clearly influenced by popular national sentiment and hoping to spur development in North Carolina's poor northeast, Lindsay Warren, Congressman of the state's first district, which included both Pasquotank County (Elizabeth City) and Dare County, introduced a bill to Congress to create a memorial to the Wright brothers on December 17th, 1926, the anniversary of the first flight. Congress approved a memorial to be constructed and administered under the auspices of the War Department in February and President Calvin Coolidge signed the bill March 2nd, but the project bogged down for several years over the type and scale of a monument to be constructed at Kill Devil Hills. A symbol of national achievement, erected to promote pride and reverence for a shared national selfhood, hardly

⁸⁰ Andrew M. Hewes, *Wright Brothers National Memorial*, (Washington, DC: National Park Service, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, Division of History, 1967), 1-3; Susan L. Hitchcock, *Wright Brothers National Memorial Cultural Landscape Report*, (Washington, DC: National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 2001), 25; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 63-69; The phrase "manufacture of consent," used here in altered form, is from Walter Lippman's 1922 work on propaganda and the limits of media in creating an informed public, *Public Opinion*, (New York: Free Press, 1965, first published 1922), 158.

made sense to construct on an inaccessible island, and the Memorial Commission members who would determine and approve the final monument were reluctant to spend much money under those conditions. Herbert Hoover, who as Secretary of Commerce chaired the Commission, disparaged “dumping a quarter of a million dollars of public money on a sand dune where only a few neighborhood natives would see it.” As the Commission deliberated, Warren and other proponents strategized to promote road building. Constructing roads would entice the federal government to build a larger monument at Kill Devil Hills and the promise of such a monument could stimulate the Highway Commission to build roads; both would encourage tourism and increase the value of adjacent lands.⁸¹

Congressman Warren repeatedly assured Hoover and others that infrastructure to connect the proposed monument by automobile was underway, and nobody was locally more active to ensure a favorable outcome than W.O. Saunders. In his newspaper, Saunders tirelessly promoted the Wright brother’s memorial project, holding in mid-1927 a several-week-long contest to name the unknown structure. Saunders helped to found a lobbying organization called the Kill Devil Hills Memorial Association in August of 1927 to promote both roads and monument, and he became the Association’s first president. As president, Saunders wrote numerous letters to influential men inviting them to serve on an “Advisory Council” of his Association. By winter of 1927 the memorial’s Advisory Council boasted several prominent names, among them Charles Lindbergh, General John Pershing, Joseph

⁸¹ Hewes, *Wright Brothers*, 5-14; Hoover is quoted in “Had the Courage to Arrest Movement of Kill Devil Hill,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, Section 2, 18 November 1932. I am simplifying in attributing the Wright memorial bill to Warren, since a senator, Hiram Bingham of Connecticut, coincidentally introduced a bill the same day. It was actually Bingham’s bill that passed, though Warren successfully introduced amendments that Bingham opposed, and Warren afterward continued to be intimately involved in the process of establishing the memorial.

Pulitzer, and William Randolph Hearst, as well as many others, whose clout Saunders used to pressure the state to construct a road along the northern banks. The Highway Commission purchased land for the proposed road by the end of that year.⁸² The Kill Devil Hills Memorial Association, in coordination with the National Aeronautical Association, also organized a 25th anniversary ceremony to commemorate the Wrights with a large gathering and the laying of a temporary marker. The crowd on December 17, 1928 included Orville Wright, Amelia Earhart, Secretary of War Dwight Davis, 200 delegates from the International Civil Aeronautics Conference, and around 2000 others. Though the event was by all accounts a great success, the embarrassment that ferry boats hired for the occasion were still carrying passengers across Currituck Sound after 1:00 a.m. highlighted the limits of crowd capacity on the late 1920s northern banks.⁸³

At the same time that Saunders pressured the State Highway Commission, businessmen from Elizabeth city, headed by Carl Blades, petitioned Raleigh for permission to build a toll bridge across Currituck Sound. The proposed bridge would connect Point

⁸² Saunders held a several-weeks-long contest to name the unknown structure that would memorialize the Wright brothers' achievement. Saunders finally declared a winner on July 15, 1927, calling it "The Wright Beacon," though the name did not stick. The purpose was to get public participation and enthusiasm for regional publicity; "Kill Devil Hills Memorial Association: But for Which the Wright Memorial Might Have Been Just Another Inconspicuous Marker," Elizabeth City *Independent*, Section 3, 18 November 1932. W.O. Saunders' newspaper recorded a sort of official history of the Memorial Association the day before the memorial was opened to the public to great fanfare. The article explains "The object of this Association was to arouse local, state and national interest in the proposed memorial . . . Before the government could be persuaded to construct a notable memorial at Kill Devil Hills, Kill Devil Hills must be made easily accessible by motor to all Americans," which it goes on to say was the special object of the Association; Hewes, *Wright Brothers*, 14-18. Hewes lists several names of men on the Advisory Council in 1927. By November 18th of 1932, some of the names listed had been deleted and some added when Saunders listed the council members in his newspaper. An important addition was that of "Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt."

⁸³ "Wright Memorial Bridge Forms Link Between Dare County and the Mainland of Eastern North Carolina," *The Daily Advance*, 18 November 1932; Hitchcock, *Wright Brothers National Memorial*, 26. There are conflicting numbers given in the two accounts cited here. The earlier newspaper story has the number of visitors at around 2,000 and the later document claims 3,000. The earlier account, with an author closer to the event and using a more conservative number seems a safer bet.

Harbor on the mainland to the banks just north of Kitty Hawk, near the path that Orville Wright travelled nearly 25 years earlier. With permission granted, the eventual corporation hardly obscured the purpose of its formation: the Wright Memorial Bridge Company ultimately constructed the “Wright Memorial Bridge” in 1930, connecting the banks to a single road that necessarily funneled traveling visitors from south and west through Elizabeth City. The NC Highway Commission completed the 18-mile Virginia Dare Trail the following year, connecting the new bridge by paved surface with Baum’s earlier bridge. “Ten days after the bridge was opened,” a local newspaper reported, “1150 cars had passed over it.”⁸⁴ The northern banks and Roanoke ceased to be islands.

Those involved in beach development along the northern banks both enabled and benefitted from the new construction. When Frank Stick, owner of the land sought for the Wright brothers monument, learned of the potential memorial structure, he immediately wired Lindsay Warren a telegraph that read “My associates and myself . . . own the Kill Devil Hills tract and will gladly deed these hills and adjacent land required for monument and reservation to government without cost.” Stick and his associates donated over 200 acres for the memorial.⁸⁵ A seemingly generous gift, a national monument beside his property would also give Stick’s real estate the “drawing power” it lacked, promote paved access, and exponentially raise land values. The Wright Memorial Bridge Company, which reportedly spent more than \$255,000 to build their bridge linking the motoring public to the fledgling

⁸⁴ “Wright Memorial Bridge Forms Link,” *The Daily Advance*. The first company incorporated to construct the bridge was called the Kitty Hawk Company, also headed by Carl Blades, but they found themselves in some problematic financial entanglements, and in order to solve their problems the board members created the Wright Bothers Memorial Bridge Corporation, which then bought out the Kitty Hawk Company. W.O. Saunders was not a board member but was highly involved with the first company, and he loaned the second company \$1,500.

⁸⁵ Hewes, *Wright Brothers*, 10, 18. Hewes quotes Stick’s telegraph to Lindsay Warren, found in the Warren Papers held at UNC.

beach resort, also stood to gain from the vacationing public. The bridge promised to benefit nearby Elizabeth City, *the* city near the outer banks, from which most of the company's owners descended, but the bridge owners were also more directly interested in the beach. The company's certificate of incorporation allowed them not only to construct a bridge, but also, among other related powers, to purchase and improve real estate. In addition to building the bridge, the company purchased 6,000 acres of beachfront property running alongside a road that the Highway Commission had already pledged to build. Creating a necessary infrastructural link to make the outer banks auto accessible, the Bridge Company catalyzed the synergy between the monument and state roads, helping to convince the Memorial Commission to erect a formidable monument to the Wright brothers while also justifying state-funded paved lanes in this peripheral county. The bridge corporation benefitted from both sides. And by the 1930s the Wright Memorial Bridge Company had become the largest landholder in the Kitty Hawk-Nags Head area.⁸⁶

Local activism and support successfully prepared the ground for a large national memorial to aviation. Congress approved \$100,000 to construct a "memorial light tower" at Kill Devil Hill, and planners chose to erect a 60 foot granite shaft, carved with an Art Deco design and topped by a light beacon. They furthermore decided that the proper place for their monument would be atop the 90-foot-high Kill Devil Hill sand dune, in front of which the

⁸⁶ "Wright Memorial Bridge Company and Kitty Hawk Company Records," David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center; "Wright Memorial Bridge Forms Link," *The Daily Advance*; The National Park Service's assessment in 1934 to consider the Kill Devil Hill strip (independently of what was called the Kitty Hawk and Nags Head strips, respectively), the listing of the landholders who they would have to buy out showed the Wright Memorial Bridge Company with 5,450 acres. The second largest landholder was the Bodie Island Realty Company with 2,300 acres. Frank Stick at the time personally had only 213 acres and his Virginia Dare Shores had 564 acres. "National Seashore Recreational Area 'Kill Devil Hill' North Carolina," US National Archive, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, National Park Service, Region I, Central Files 1934-44, Proposed Seashore Areas, Kill Devil Hill folder.

Wright brothers made their famous flight. The only problem was that, like the sand mountain on which the Wrights camped in 1900, Kill Devil Hill was a mobile dune. Those organizing the 1928 ceremony remarked how this translated into the difficulty of locating the original launch site, because the dune had in fact migrated a few hundred feet. Placing a monument atop the dune would necessitate stabilizing the sandy base. Landscape engineers were optimistic. In 1929, workers administered by the War Department plowed shallow furrows thirty inches apart along the entire dune surface; applied fertilizer, wire grass roots, and Bermuda grass seed; then covered the whole area in two to three inches of what locals called “woods mold,” the partially decomposed litter and duff from nearby forests. They also used wire fencing to keep wandering livestock away from new grass seedlings. Stabilizing the dune required periodic replanting over the years and, along with further elaborations, helped to increase the project’s cost to more than \$277,000, but the operation was largely successful. And that experience served as a precedent, suggesting to locals the possibilities of dune stabilization on the banks generally in the 1930s. Construction began on the granite monument in 1931, and a second commemoration ceremony opened to the public the Kill Devil Hill Monument on November 19th, 1932 (it was later renamed the Wright Brothers National Memorial in 1953 when administration converged with that of the nearby Cape Hatteras National Seashore).⁸⁷ The monument to flight on the outer banks embodied the aims of congressmen to commemorate the greatness of the American spirit and promote national

⁸⁷ Hitchcock, *Wright Brothers National Memorial*, 27-31; Hewes, *Wright Brothers*, 23-30. Many in the 1930s and beyond cited the success of stabilizing the Kill Devil Hill as evidence that eliminating livestock from an area of the banks allowed that area to attain its “natural” vegetative cover, though they ignored the fact that workers applied a great deal of fertilizer in addition to sowing grass seed. See, for instance, Frank Stick, “North Carolina Coastal Development Council: Proposed Coastal Park and Forest Reserve,” 5 Oct. 1933, North Carolina State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region, Frank Stick—Coastal Development Commission 1933 folder.

unity while also fulfilling boosters' desires to transform the barrier landscape into valuable real estate. That relationship was reciprocal. If local promoters exploited the Wright brothers' historic flight to generate profit out of place, they likewise endowed the Wrights themselves with particular meaning and helped to create the legend from which they profited.

Developers had from the beginning co-opted histories connected to nearby places for marketing purposes. As early as 1927, Frank Stick's Virginia Dare Shores development published a promotional pamphlet that not only extolled the climate, the land, and hunting and fishing possibilities, but also the shared past that fellow Americans may have thought valuable to imagine. The first few pages of the pamphlet included an early map and a brief history lesson of the Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony, which had settled on nearby Roanoke Island. That the pamphlet mentioned the Wright brothers only in passing suggests that it was published prior to knowledge of the potential monument.⁸⁸ After local promoters reclaimed the Wright brothers, these two stories became the basic narrative of the Outer Banks, stories that appealed to a national character. They were "first" stories that fit in with the dominant narrative of American progress and inevitability. And they reminded buyers and visitors that the outer banks may be peripheral, but the landscape was wholly American.⁸⁹

The recreational uses to which that landscape was to be put also supposed a national, modern sentiment in the 1920s. The Virginia Dare Shores pamphlet described their holdings accordingly: "Forty miles of ocean front and thirty-five miles of bay waters all dedicated to

⁸⁸ "Virginia Dare Shores, North Carolina, 1927," page 9, East Carolina University, *Wright Brothers Digital Exhibit*, online resource, <http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/exhibits/wright/htmlFiles/VDSH1.html>, (accessed 3 April 2008).

⁸⁹ Any promotional literature for the Outer Banks or Dare County beginning in the early 1930s mentions these two histories together. For an example in 1932, see the advertisement "Welcome to Dare County," *The Daily Advance*, 18 November 1932.

the purpose for which nature intended them. A romantic beauty to be kept in all its purity for the benefit of mankind.” Boasting, according to these promoters, the greatest waterfowl hunting and fishing area in the country, the northern banks were a sportsman’s paradise. And part of that paradise could be had on the cheap, provided one was far-sighted enough to act immediately.⁹⁰ There was a target audience, and it was not every American. The sentiments, and the logic, to which developers appealed would have been familiar to urbanites pleased to escape the constructed landscape of the city and muddy their shoes with a rifle or fishing pole in a relative wilderness or to stroll barefoot along the beach, but that expectation would have been quite alien to those living along the outer banks south of Nags Head. Islanders gladly served as sportsman’s guides, but they worked on the land and on the water for a living. Developers appealed to a different culture, servicing those who came to the banks not to labor but to play, and who brought with them disposable incomes, and a familiar sense of self.⁹¹

Just as plans for the beach development seemed successful, a nationwide economic Depression devastated developers’ hopes. Few lots were being sold, and their landholdings devolved from boons to tax liabilities. When conservationists in the 1930s sought to create a coastal park, an idea attributed to Frank Stick, and to “restore” the land, many saw that promise as a way to save themselves and their investments. As the federal government came to shape not only waterways around the outer banks but also the land itself, the new custodians’ desires for the islands carried increasing political weight throughout the outer

⁹⁰ “Virginia Dare Shores,” East Carolina University, *Wright Brothers Digital Exhibit*.

⁹¹ Concepts dividing use and knowledge of nature between productive labor and recreation, used throughout this thesis, are from Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work For a Living?” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996).

banks. The larger markets and federal programs that served to recreate the banks in the early 20th century more radically re-directed island social, political, and economic landscapes beginning in the early 1930s.⁹²

The northern resorts and the more southern fishing villages marked two essentially different ways of using the outer banks landscape, and those uses translated to building on opposite sides of the islands. Whereas every settlement had previously been oriented toward the sounds where locals could exploit the natural capital of the estuaries, the resorts of Nags Head-Kitty Hawk focused on the unproductive beach. Speculators found cheap land for sale between and in front of villages, because for locals those spaces had little value. They could not be made to grow vegetables or trees. But that land could be parceled and resold for temporary homes and used for recreation. When the federal state arrived in the 1930s seeking to restore the banks landscape and to mediate uses, federal agents had to deal with two types of residents, two views from the banks. Fishermen and vacationers awoke each morning gazing in opposite directions.

By the 1930s the two major banks cultures not only made the land productive in different ways but also related to the landscape differently. Whereas the longtime residents carved out garden plots and used the rest of the land informally as a type of commons, developers parceled out that land into square one-acre lots and sought to sell each section to private owners for summer homes. Where locals lived reactively with the landscape, moving houses in the face of cataclysmic ocean surges or migrating sand dunes, new investors drew lines in the sand, up to the oceanfront, and expected their land to stay in place.

⁹² Stick, *Outer Banks*, 247-250.

It was precisely because of the precarious nature of the coastal area that the state Highway Commission rejected Wash Baum's bridge, only reluctantly constructed a road along the northern banks, and hesitated to support a road along Hatteras until the late 1940s, and a decade later on Ocracoke, after the landscape had been modified to protect the mid-island flats from storm surges. But endorsing the road brought the power of the state behind developers. By laying the section of the Virginia Dare Trail along the northern banks, the state committed to maintaining that 18-mile highway on the outer banks indefinitely. Paving a lane along the Kitty Hawk-Nags Head area not only helped investors on the northern beaches; it also helped to impose a developer's logic on the outer banks lands, and it reflected the relative disparity of the new political landscape of the coast, where developers' and vacationers' desires increasingly held sway. As a state investment, the road mobilized the resources of the state behind those who sought to keep the land in place. When the ocean threatened, as it did following two hurricanes in the fall of 1933, damage to the Virginia Dare Trail served as evidence that the banks landscape needed modification, not that the road should be abandoned.⁹³ Rather than modify their assumptions about the practicality of building a road on a barrier island, state officials sought to modify the land to conform to their assumptions.

⁹³ That dunes were seen as a prerequisite for a road was expressed clearly in a project recommendation, undated and unsigned though supposedly issued in late 1933 or early 1934, by the NC Department of Conservation and Development, "North Carolina Coastal Development," North Carolina State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, North Carolina Coastal Development folder; North Carolina's state forester, J.S. Holmes, "Report on the 'Banks' of Dare County," made the initial recommendation on "rehabilitating" the outer banks in the 1930s by building up shoreline barrier dunes. The damage from the hurricanes of 1933, along with prevalent assumptions about natural island stability, was used as primary evidence to argue for a large public works project.

When the Wright brothers arrived at the North Carolina shore in 1900 they arrived at a place very different from the city they were used to. They wrote frequently about Kitty Hawk because the land and its people seemed to them peculiar and interesting. Like villages farther south, Kitty Hawk made a living largely through fishing. They were close-knit, hard working, and self-sufficient. In letters to their father and sister, the Wright brothers' story of the outer banks was one of isolation and economic poverty, but not of despair. In the 1920s, boosters and politicians used the story of the Wright brother's successful flight to change the conditions that Orville and Wilbur described. By linking the Wright brother's invention to the place of their successful experiments, promoters of a memorial to the Wrights connected the outer banks to a national narrative of ingenuity and inevitability. The new story of the outer banks helped bring the necessary infrastructure for development, and new roads markedly increased the value of the land around Kitty Hawk-Nags Head. Above all, developers who quickly gained so much wanted to keep their real estate and new road protected from the tragedies characteristic of the coastal climate. When conservationists came in the 1930s suggesting that the shoreline should be stabilized in order to restore the natural vegetation to the outer banks, that new narrative already fit the dominant stories being told.

CHAPTER III

The Making of Nature on the Outer Banks: Engineering Landscape and Social Space, 1907-1953

“Some claim man is courting disaster by failing to leave flood gates or overflow areas . . .but none deny that nature and man, working in unison, are stabilizing and reforesting (the Outer Banks) on an unprecedented scale.”¹

–David Stick, 1964

In 1890, a journalist named John Spears published an article in *Scribner’s Magazine* forecasting impending doom for residents of North Carolina’s Hatteras Island: “[T]he time will soon come when this simple people must be driven from their homes, pursued by a fate as irresistible as the deluge of old, leaving behind them all the associations of their race, of their customs, and of their occupations; leaving the bones of their dead to whiten in the burning sun, or to be lifted from their resting-place and tossed about by the merciless wind.” Spears was the first to decry what had become a serious problem on North Carolina’s barrier islands during the 19th century. Large migratory dunes, what Spears called “sand waves,” were blowing across the island, covering and devastating everything in their path, including one of the island’s few dense forests, what is now called Buxton Woods, along the cape. For Spears, the lack of forest, in fact, was both a cause and effect of the sand’s destructiveness. “Fifty years ago,” Spears claimed, “Hatteras Island, from inlet to inlet, a distance of over forty miles, was almost completely covered with a prodigious growth of trees,” but through axe and fire, locals driven by “thoughtless greed” had denuded the land. Without the protective cover of vegetation, sand piled along the shore to create a series of extensive dunes

¹ David Stick, *The Cape Hatteras Seashore*, (Charlotte: McNally and Loftin, Publishers, 1964), 51.

thirty miles in length rolling inward on houses, on the forests on which locals depended and, symbolically, on a graveyard. Here was clear evidence of a failed landscape. Due to short-sighted exploitation of the natural island environment, the people that Spears called “a contented race” had destroyed their own ability to live with the land.²

Previous visitors interpreted the landscape differently. They saw sublimity, not devastation, in the moving sand. When George Higby Throop came to the nascent Nags Head resort in the 1840s, he witnessed what he called “the gradual entombing of whole acres of live-oaks and pines by the gradual drifting of the restless sands from the beach.” Though Throop claimed that there was no “more melancholy sight in the world,” he waxed romantic about the vine-covered treetop protruding from the dune “to which (he said) I often walk in the gray of the morning.”³ For Throop, dunes embodied the sublime; like a thunderstorm, they were both terrifying and beautiful. Throop and Spears expected and found different experiences: Throop arrived at the outer banks as a vacationer seeking a space for recreation and found beauty, while Spears came looking for a productive landscape and found failure. Dominant American attitudes toward natural space and resource use changed in the fifty years separating these accounts, but the dispute primarily represented not an evolving mainland culture, but rather fundamentally different ways of seeing and using the outer banks.⁴ A century later, vacationers at Nags Head would have agreed with Throop, not Spears.

² John R. Spears, “Sand-Waves at Henlopen and Hatteras,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, Vol. 8, (July-Dec 1890), 510-512. Quotes are all from pp. 512.

³ George Higby Throop, *Nag’s Head and Bertie: Two Novels by George Higby Throop* (Charlotte: Heritage House, 1958), 45-46.

⁴ Jim Senter, “Live Dunes and Ghost Forests: Stability and Change in the History of North Carolina’s Maritime Forests,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 80, no.3 (July 2003), 336. Senter uses a similar exchange between

The North Carolina outer banks were just one place where desires for the land moved back and forth between productive and recreational space. The Spears-Throop debate (if we may call it that) represents an early manifestation of what became a fundamental split in early twentieth-century thinking about nature and resources, which played out at the national level. Progressive Conservationists like Theodore Roosevelt's chief forester Gifford Pinchot and his cohorts of scientific managers sought to rationalize resource use, while the romantically-inclined John Muir wrote passionately and organized to preserve beautiful and supposedly pristine landscapes.⁵ On the Carolina banks, early twentieth-century desires for the land split between uses of the sound-side forests, which were the locus of productivity for local villagers, and the unproductive beaches; between industry and recreation.

When the National Park Service officially established the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area as the nation's first seashore park in January 1953, they designated the stretch of barrier islands along the Carolina shore from Bodie Island to Ocracoke Inlet as lands preserved primarily for recreational use. As the first seashore park, the outcome for Cape Hatteras defined the category of a new kind of public land. Though designated as a recreational area, defining the seashore park involved decades of jockeying between industrial and recreational visions for the outer banks, and scientific professionals creating the park enmeshed those visions in complicated ways. The park's creation really began in the 1930s with a large-scale New Deal restoration, or as they called it at the time a "rehabilitation," project to remake the outer banks landscape, and that project's purpose was

Spears and Throop, but he concludes that their different views represent changing attitudes in mainland culture generally. There is some truth to that, but it is not the main thrust of the different narratives.

⁵ Many authors have contrasted Gifford Pinchot's and John Muir's attitudes toward uses of natural spaces. A fine general description of this distinction can be found in Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 137-156.

wrapped up in the stories that people told about the forests and the ways that scientific managers imagined a healthy and productive banks environment.⁶

The foresters who conceptualized the 1930s project to restore the Carolina barrier islands sought to re-create an imagined past environment, an “original” nature of the outer banks. Their models were problematic, imported from mainland coastal environments and imposed on the North Carolina barrier islands. When professional foresters came to the banks, they saw the moving dunes that Spears witnessed and believed they witnessed a devastated space. They believed the islands, in their natural state, had once been stable and supported widespread forests. Restoration for them thus meant stabilizing the barriers enough to produce the type of timber forests typical of stable mainland areas.⁷ But those forests were not typical on the banks, and the land was never firm. In attempting to achieve stability and to re-vegetate the outer banks barriers, proponents of the 1930s New Deal project massively engineered the outer banks landscape in unprecedented ways; in doing so, the effort to restore a lost environment reshaped social, economic, and political relationships on the banks.

Foresters outlined the project to restore the outer banks not in the 1930s but in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the National Park Service established the seashore recreation park that emerged from that effort only in 1953. Over those decades, though the

⁶ The conservation project on the banks has been little written about in detail until very recently. The National Park Service commissioned and accepted the final draft of the first administrative history for the Cape Hatteras Park only in November of 2007. It is a meticulous account of events and also traces the origins of the park to the 1930s project. Cameron Binkley, *The Creation and Establishment of Cape Hatteras National Seashore: The Great Depression Through Mission 66*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, 2007). This copy of Binkley’s report was given to me by the Cape Hatteras Park Service Historian, Doug Stover, and at the time it was not yet released to the public. A later copy may have different pagination.

⁷ Those seeking stability included Collier Cobb, Jay Bond, J.S. Holmes, and many others. Their views are discussed below in detail.

mandate of conservation remained the same—to preserve and restore original nature to the land—the purposes of conservation evolved to serve quite different goals and constituencies. The project to remake nature on the outer banks therefore serves as a useful lens for understanding how resource managers’ ideas about natural space changed over time—from Progressives through the New Deal and into the postwar era—and the evolving goals of conservation that ultimately shaped the Cape Hatteras project. Because environmental engineering also functioned as social engineering, it is these changing purposes that matter.

Spears wrote contemporaneously with the surge of state and federal bureaucratic organizations created to appropriate public lands and efficiently manage resource use. Congress had created the US Geological Survey only eleven years earlier to map and classify public lands, particularly in the West, and the application of planned scientific conservation management soon launched under Gifford Pinchot’s leadership in the late 1890s. Conservation leaders in North Carolina created a North Carolina Geological Survey (NCGS) in 1891, through which they pursued a manifold agenda. The NCGS sought to regulate timbering and control forest fires, “reclaim” or drain eastern lowlands, and protect wildlife, especially birds and fisheries, through regulated management. By negotiating resource use at the state level and determining the most productive use of state resources, conservation proponents believed that they could preserve and ensure future resource abundance for all. Among southern states, North Carolinians most actively pursued a conservation agenda. By 1915, state legislators had passed laws allowing for the acquisition of state forests and for the suppression of fires; created both the North Carolina Drainage Association to reclaim wetlands and the North Carolina Fisheries Association for state-wide regulatory enforcement;

they passed an Audubon Law that gave the state the authority to enforce bird and gaming laws, and also created the first gaming commission in the South. All of this legislation passed after the turn of the century under some of the most staunchly conservative governments in North Carolina history. Legislators ultimately embraced conservation as an economic asset. Management would ensure future resource viability and attract outside investment.⁸ Conservation was good business.

The NCGS commissioned Gifford Pinchot along with North Carolina forester William W. Ashe to conduct a survey of the state's forests in 1896. Pinchot and Ashe eventually toured the outer banks, where they found absent forests and rolling dunes. Tempering Spears' claim somewhat, Pinchot and Ashe argued that "Some (of the sand-dominated) areas were originally forest-covered, though once cleared" loggers had transformed that space into sandy dunes that threatened adjacent forests. The foresters, therefore, recommended potential government action, but not to save the forests. Instead, their attention moved to the effect of denuded barrier lands on navigation. As Pinchot and Ashe argued in their conclusion: "Commercially these forests are unimportant except where they produce, on some of the islands, a limited number of red cedar posts. Their protection is worthy of consideration, however, as they act as a safeguard in preventing the formation of

⁸ John R. Ross, "The North Carolina Geological Survey: 1891-1920," in *Forest History*, vol. 16 (1973): 21-27. The economic orientation of Progressive-Era conservation is argued most forcefully in Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999. First published by Harvard University Press, 1959), and perhaps made most clear in a brief essay by the same author, Samuel P. Hays, "Conservation and the Structure of American Politics: The Progressive Era," in *American Political History as Social Analysis*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 233-243.

inlets which would impair existing waterways.”⁹ Despite their job titles, Pinchot and Ashe, working prior to the creation of the Intracoastal Waterway and responding to the state of North Carolina’s principal concerns, remained preoccupied with ensuring navigation through the banks for maritime trade, not with making the land productive.¹⁰

Ten years after Pinchot and Ashe published their survey, Collier Cobb, a geologist at the University of North Carolina, became one of the first to seriously advocate landscape restoration on the outer banks. His writing seethed with optimism. Repeating earlier claims, Cobb admonished the state of North Carolina in a 1907 *National Geographic* article to build a barrier dune along the length of the coast and restore the banks forests behind the dune. “[R]eforesting the sands,” Cobb concluded, “would make of Hatteras Island, at least, a subtropical garden, where southern fruits and early vegetables once plentiful here might come in to the market . . . (and after forests are reestablished) conservative lumbering could be added to the industries of the island.”¹¹ Cobb certainly had his detractors. On one copy of a transcribed speech Cobb made in 1908 (housed in the National Park Service archive in Manteo, NC), in which he laid forth even more sanguine claims, one critic, apparently a contemporary, had scrawled this across the top of the first page: “This author just happens to be a flamboyant dreamer . . . The man should be crucified for his lunacy and may we all pray that he never gets into politics.”¹²

⁹ Gifford Pinchot and William W. Ashe, *Timber Trees and Forests of North Carolina*, North Carolina Geological Survey, Bulletin no. 6, (Winston, NC: M.I. and J.C. Stewart, 1897), 146-147.

¹⁰ See chapter 1 for a discussion on navigation and the importance of the Intracoastal Waterway to interstate navigation.

¹¹ Collier Cobb, “Where the Wind Does the Work,” *The National Geographic Magazine*, (June 1906): 317.

¹² Collier Cobb, “The North Carolina Coast—Its Perils and How They Might Be Lessened,” [Reprinted from Report of Proceedings, First Annual Convention, Atlantic Deeper Waterways Association, held a Baltimore,

Cobb's basic argument concerning reforestation at Hatteras was, nevertheless, widely accepted in scientific circles. The same year that Cobb published his article, the North Carolina Geological Survey hired the Forest Assistant to the US Forest Service, Jay F. Bond, to undertake a survey of the Hatteras banks. His findings likely influenced Cobb's assertions. Bond blamed the sterile landscape on "careless lumbering . . . made permanent by unrestricted grazing" of cattle, sheep, goats, and hogs, and he detailed a systematic restoration strategy. Drawing on European coastal restoration models, Bond proposed a two-pronged approach: eliminate the livestock and building a barrier dune along the shore and planting grasses, shrubs, and trees behind the dune, much as the work programs of the 1930s later achieved. He described the process of reforestation in great detail down to the cost of materials and the feasibility of such a project.¹³ It was Bond's proposal that outlined the basic approach to barrier island restoration in North Carolina, and from the 1930s New Deal project to the creation of the Cape Hatteras Park in 1953, this paradigm of decline and restoration formed the conceptual frame for landscape management on the outer banks.

The scientists who constructed this potent and lasting narrative of environmental decline, it seems, got much of it wrong. This is not to argue that the settlers and their biological counterparts had not transformed the land. Certainly, the outer banks landscape had changed over time. Settlers did clear trees to make one-acre garden plots, they harvested cedars and oaks with bent forms conducive to boat designs, and they also cut up snags and less useful trees for cooking and, during the very short winter season, heating fuel. A small,

Nov. 17, 18, 19, 1908, pp. 159-164. Philadelphia, 1909], in Collier Cobb file, National Park Service Archive, Cape Hatteras, Manteo.

¹³ Jay F. Bond, "Report on an Examination of the Sand Banks Along the North Carolina Coast," *Biennial Report of the State Geologist, 1907-1908*, (Raleigh: E.M. Uzzell & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1908), 43-48.

apparently abortive logging operation also existed at Buxton Woods in the early 20th century.¹⁴ The domesticated animals that Euro-Americans brought competed for resources and crowded out native species. Livestock fed mostly on marsh grasses, where they changed speciation dynamics, and their grazing served to maintain the mid-island flats as grasslands rather than shrub thickets.¹⁵ Nevertheless, conservationists' assumptions were problem-laden: historical records and later scientific evidence showed convincingly that the islands were never extensively forested;¹⁶ recent research on livestock feeding habits and vegetational response on barrier islands shows that native grasses had adapted to living with dynamic

¹⁴ Logging practices are recounted in *Final Draft Report: An Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages Adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Selected Interpretive Themes*, submitted to: National Park Service, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, (La Jolla, CA: Impact Assessment, Inc, 2005), 43, 109; A biologist, Thomas H. Kearney, claimed in 1900 that Ocracokers imported all of their firewood and never felled an oak because of the value of trees as wind breaks, in "The Plant Covering of Ocracoke Island: A Study in the Ecology of the North Carolina Strand Vegetation," *Contributions from the US National Herbarium*, vol. 5, no. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900), 71. That logging was limited and selective into the 1930s, and the settlement plots were typically around one acre, was affirmed by Sylvan Settel, Sr. Foreman Forester for the Beach Erosion Control Project, who undertook forest surveys for Nags Head Woods, Kitty Hawk Woods, and the woods of Collington Islands in 1938. He also intended to conduct a survey of Buxton (or Cape) Woods subsequently. The first three surveys are archived in the same folder. US National Archives, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Branch of Forestry, Correspondence and Subject Files, 1928-1959, Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreation Area, Vegetative Typemapping folder; For the logging operation, see Bratton, "Disturbance and Succession," 169-170, and Bond, "Examination of the Sand Banks," 42.

¹⁵ We can best reconstruct the effects of the pre-New Deal banks environment by looking at the effects of livestock on Shackleford Banks, where the animals continued to roam until 1986, and where no one constructed shoreline dunes. See Gene W. Wood, Michael T. Mengak, and Mark Murphy, "Ecological Importance of Feral Ungulates at Shackleford Banks, North Carolina," *The American Midland Naturalist*, vol. 118, no. 2, (Oct. 1987), 236-243.

¹⁶ Many have argued that the banks were never historically forested, beginning with Charles W. Porter's report for the National Park Service in 1938. The most easily accessible histories that argue this point are Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 24, 136, and Senter, "Ghost Forests," 349-371. Much of the evidence scientists had for historic forests on the banks was local memory combined with stumps on beach areas, especially above Rodanthe and at Wash Woods near the Virginia border. Proponents of restoration argued that forests could and did grow right up to the dune line. Stumps do show that the shore moved landward, but not that forests were at one time near the beaches. In 1939, B.W. Wells published a study challenging the notion that forests could grow near the shore because of the limitations of salt spray. See "A New Forest Climax: the Salt Spray Climax of Smith Island, N.C." in *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club* vol. 66, no. 9 (Dec. 1939). For a good early discussion of doubt about complete forestation, see Clair A Brown, *Vegetation of the Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 10-14.

climatic conditions on barrier islands that caused frequent disturbance, that grasses rebound quickly, and that grazing would not significantly reduce ground cover;¹⁷ many scientists later argued that hurricanes, especially a severe succession of storms in the mid-19th century, rather than local loggers, were the *primary* cause of migratory dunes;¹⁸ and the islands themselves, geologists showed definitively by the early 1970s, were mobile landscapes that migrate landward with rising sea level. Stabilizing barrier dunes actually increased the erosion rate of beaches.¹⁹

The contrast between scientific assumptions in the first half of the 20th century with later science begs several questions. First, why was the science so out of step with later findings? What assumptions did conservationists carry to the outer banks that led to their

¹⁷ Wood et al., “Ecological Importance of Feral Ungulates,” and Jill Baron, “Effects of Feral Hogs on the Vegetation of Horn Island, Mississippi,” *The American Midland Naturalist*, vol. 107, no. 1 (Jan., 1982), both show that, though livestock certainly alter vegetational composition, they did not fundamentally transform the vegetational cover, except in limiting shrubby plants on the mid-island flats. The best evidence for arguing that livestock grazing did not promote the continuation of migratory dunes on barrier landscapes comes from a control site for comparison. There was a large migratory dune on Shackleford at the turn of the 20th century, and though people no longer lived on the island after 1899, large numbers of livestock continued to graze freely on the island. No land managers came to the rescue at Shackleford, yet the migratory dune stabilized without interference by the late 1930s despite the livestock that continued to graze on the island until 1986.

¹⁸ The theory of hurricane agency in creating migratory dunes was first promoted by William L. Engels in “Vertebrate Fauna of North Carolina Coastal Islands, II: Shackleford Banks,” *The American Midland Naturalist* vol. 47 (1952), 708-720, and many others have since made similar arguments. Jim Senter, “Ghost Forests,” 369. Senter, a biologist, compiled a great deal of evidence to make this point forcefully, arguing that the forty-six hurricanes that struck the North Carolina coast between 1840 and 1899 were much more likely to have initiated the migratory dunes, which Senter also argues were a cyclical, natural phenomenon of the barrier island environment.

¹⁹ Robert Dolan and Paul Godfrey were the scientists most instrumental in challenging conventional wisdom and in convincing the scientific community, and then the NPS, that beach erosion control through stabilizing structures, including dunes, is detrimental to beaches and to maintaining barrier islands. The best account of the implications of their findings and how the National Park Service dealt with that contradiction is Robert D. Behn and Martha A. Clark, *Termination II: How the National Park Service Annulled its “Commitment” To a Beach Erosion Control Policy at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore*, (Durham: Center for Policy Analysis, Duke University, 1976). Dolan published many articles and technical papers in 1972, but he first made his argument public in “Barrier Dune Systems Along the Outer Banks of North Carolina: A Reappraisal,” *Science*, vol. 176, no. 4032 (April 21, 1972), 286-288. Godfrey published his overwash theory in a larger study two years earlier, *Oceanic Overwash and Its Ecological Implications on the Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Washington, DC: Office of Natural Science Studies, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1970).

interpretations? More important are the implications of conservation for those who would use the nature supposedly being conserved. If the reforestation and erosion control project remained within a similar general framework throughout the first half of the 20th century, then, in what ways did conservationists' social goals change over time? If remaking and improving nature was the shared objective, how would that nature be used, and who would benefit?

Spears, Cobb, and Bond all agreed that the banks had been deforested, that local exploitation had transformed the barriers into failed landscapes. The shared framework of environmental degradation was consistent with the deforested mainland areas, and when scientists came to the banks they brought that model with them. In part, conservationists assumed that the banks had once been deforested because local residents remembered more extensive forests. Everyone writing about decline on the banks, from Spears to the various voices in the 1930s, asserted that local residents recalled a time within their lifetime when the barriers were completely or at least extensively forested. Nobody apparently examined what locals meant by forests. The category that included large timber stands for mainlanders was probably quite different for islanders, who may have considered the common shrub thickets interspersed with stunted live oaks to pass the threshold. In any case, memory was among the primary evidence, and if the banks were formerly clothed in woods, all voices seemed to agree, wooded banks must be natural.²⁰ The evolving declension narrative additionally

²⁰ John Spears in 1890, US forester Jay Bond in 1907, and the principle restoration project outline prepared by the NC Department of Conservation and Development in 1933, among others, all provide local memory of past forests as evidence for natural decline on the banks. Spears, "Sand-Waves," 510; Bond, "Examination of the Sand Banks," 42; (unsigned), "North Carolina Coastal Development: Description, Objectives, Estimates," NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, North Carolina Coastal Development folder, p. 4. Besides memory, foresters cited

leaned on ideas about natural processes and human destructiveness prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nature as many of Bond's contemporaries understood it exists as a steady state. Without human interference, environments tend toward complexity and equilibrium, a stability that foresters on the mainland sought to preserve or restore. Where humans previously remade and simplified landscapes, natural regeneration would reproduce the most complex and stable state possible under place-specific pressures. Thus, deforested areas should naturally regenerate new forest; plowed up prairies would in time return to prairie, and those new habitats would comprise all the necessary and reciprocally-supportive associations that made up the stable "climax" environment. It was this concept that the American ecologist Frederic Clements popularized as the "succession-climax" model.²¹

Humans, on the other hand, stood outside of this framework. As George Perkins Marsh, the intellectual father of American conservation, made explicit in his widely influential book *Man and Nature*, published in 1864, "of all organic beings, man alone is to be regarded as essentially a destructive power."²² Marsh warned of the dire consequences of continued industrialization if resources were not regulated by governments, but he also made a much broader argument: taking evidence from the large-scale environmental transformations that accompanied the rise of the Roman Empire, Marsh concluded that

the "ghost forests" near the edge of living woods, where trees had been smothered and killed by the rolling sand. They also pointed to stumps along the beach at Wash Woods and in front of Chicamacomico. The stumps, however, were evidence only that the shore had moved. Chicamacomico, in fact, was in the 16th century a prominent cape, which reformed drastically and straightened out over the 17th century, leaving Wimble Shoals and the beach stumps as the only evidence of the former cape.

²¹ Frederic E. Clements, "Nature and Structure of the Climax," reprinted in *Foundations of Ecology: Classic Papers with Commentary*, Leslie A. Real and James H. Brown, eds., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59-69. The popularity of Clements' findings are related in Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2nd Edition, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 205-212.

²² George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, ed. David Lowenthal, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 36.

civilization and Nature were at odds. Whereas Marsh saw nomadism as a static relationship with nature, “with stationary life, or rather with the pastoral state, man at once commences an almost indiscriminate warfare upon all the forms of animal and vegetable existence around him,” which necessitated not a return to a simpler past, but control and regulation by enlightened governmental bodies. Though he preceded Clements by decades, Marsh fundamentally agreed that prior to the arrival of Europeans North American landscapes were in a long-standing state of climax. Both Marsh and Clements ignored Indians’ methods of land management. Clements, in fact, used the western lands that Lewis and Clark described as a paradigm for natural climax: Nature before the fall. In contrast to the stable state of nature—and stability is the operative word—natural scientists designated all changes from climax environments, much of it through human usage, as “disturbance.”²³

Among disturbed landscapes, barrier islands were nevertheless unique; blowing sand from barren soils prevented forest regeneration and formed the large dunes that threatened remaining forests. Barrier islands, most observers correctly believed, were more fragile than landscapes elsewhere, and they therefore argued that the limitations of the land needed to be respected in a way that locals apparently did not appreciate. Faced with the economic pressures connected to industrial expansion, Spears, Cobb, and Bond seemed to agree, islanders had become rational profit-maximizers seeking personal gain through intensified resource extraction to the detriment of all. In addition to local timbering, Bond accused the free-ranging livestock, which locals had been grazing on lands outside of the villages for over two hundred years, of preventing the regeneration of island vegetation. Though owned

²³ See Clements, “Nature and Structure,” 59; Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 40; and Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 217-219.

by the state or, increasingly in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, by gun clubs, villagers retained usufruct rights to maintain their herds on lands outside of their villages through informal agreements. Ironically, because island cattle that had not been selectively bred did not satisfy the demands of industrial beef trade, the herds that Bond accused of destruction in the early twentieth century were probably smaller than at any time in the 19th century.²⁴

If many agreed about the causes of environmental decline on the banks, their responses to decline vastly differed. The “Tragedy of the Commons” type of narrative that foresters developed for the Outer Banks led to a conclusion that earlier visitors did not imagine. While Spears assessed the banks environment in the context of industrialization, his final argument was a very old one. Spears admonished the “contented race” of islanders to realize their folly and become responsible custodians of their land, working it and improving it in a sustainable way. In the vein of Thomas Jefferson and agronomist reformers like Edmund Ruffin, Spears assumed a reciprocal relationship between agricultural improvement and the moral integrity of the farmer. Only through personal moral rehabilitation could banks villagers restore their lands to former productivity.²⁵

Professional scientific managers, on the other hand, agreed with George Perkins Marsh that landscapes should be regulated or restored to productivity through government action. Progressive-Era conservation was at base an economic argument, and the purpose of

²⁴ Bond, “Examination of the Sand Banks,” 43; Continued traditional uses of land, despite various ownership is discussed in Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 116; Historic uses and impact of cattle are presented in Gary S. Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 65, 136.

²⁵ Spears, “Sand-Waves,” 512; For an excellent discussion of Edmund Ruffin’s attempt to rehabilitate eastern acidic soils to keep the “better elements” of Virginia from moving west, see Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

reforestation was to return not only natural but also economic stability. When Jay Bond arrived in 1907, there was a small logging company at Buxton Woods, established in 1899, though the company's operations were already suspended and their resource rights expired in 1910. Ironically, or revealingly, while Bond accused local loggers of destroying the land he did not condemn this outside company. He did not blame them for the migratory dunes. The timber company had cut trees from the sound side and the dunes blew in nearer the shore. Very far from using this timbering as evidence of foolish land use, the forester's explicit aim was to help this and similar operations. In his recommendation, Bond described new forests that a restoration project would create exclusively in terms of industrial extraction. Like other professional foresters, those who came to the banks in the early 1900s saw the woods only as so many board feet, so much usable timber. Bond estimated that the Buxton Woods stand contained 20,000,000 board feet of pine, and that, though the woods were filled with "lumber of relatively low value . . . the great market for even the poorer grades will make the exploitation of this timber profitable."²⁶ Conservation projects were essentially state or federal investments. The NCGS would adopt a policy of reforesting the islands only if such a project would make the banks pay.

Reforestation would entail regulation as well. In his report for the Geological Survey, Jay Bond advocated eliminating the free range as a precondition for reforestation and his plan proposed bringing large sections of the land under governmental control. "In addition to the enactment of stock laws," Bond argued, "it is recommended that the State acquire by

²⁶ Bond, "Examination of the Sand Banks," 42-43; That the logging operation began in 1899 is recorded by Susan Bratton and Kathryn Davidson, "Disturbance and Succession in Buxton Woods, Cape Hatteras, North Carolina," *Castanea*, 52 (Sept. 1987), 169-170. The logging operation commenced well after dunes were encroaching on the forest, and Bond states that the logging began from the sound side, so it is very unlikely that this operation created the migratory dunes.

purchase a strip of the forest and land in the lee of the (shoreline) dunes (to be constructed) not less than 500 and preferably 1000 feet wide and extending along the entire area so far as the forest occurs. . . . When the forest has been established, it should be cared for according to usual forest practices.”²⁷ State intervention, in other words, meant controlling future forests to prevent a reversion to deteriorated conditions. Managing the forests in such a manner meant controlling access to forest resources; it meant regulating the local people along with the landscape.

Bond’s argument for restoration reflected prevailing ideas among Progressive-Era conservationists not only about resource use, but also about proper relationships between government and the citizen. Reacting both to landscapes of scarcity in the wake of rapid industrialization and to competing claims for those resources, conservationists like Gifford Pinchot believed that rationally applied science and professional expertise could negotiate resource use among different users, (to repeat Pinchot’s famous mantra) “for the greatest good of the greatest number over the longest time” by determining the most efficient uses to serve the interests of all.²⁸ But to ensure best use of all resources, progressive conservationists necessarily displaced local claims for what was seen as the greater good of a national body politic, replacing local commons regimes with a national commons. Couched in terms of disinterested science, resource management meant that certain uses of the land, backed by the power of government, would prevail over others.²⁹ On the outer banks,

²⁷ Bond, “Examination of the Sand Banks,” 44-45, 47.

²⁸ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, see especially the “Preface to the Paperback Edition,” pp. vii-xiii.

²⁹ Very similar observations are made in Louis Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against*

assertions of a lost ideal environmental past served to delegitimize locals' previous uses of the land. Whether scientific managers restored or created for the first time verdant, stable lands, vegetating the sandy outer banks would change the landscape, and federal management would alter local uses of the land.

The American conservation movement adopted scientific management practices from Europe and primarily from France and Germany. Foresters like Pinchot, who studied forestry in Germany, sought to show through successful demonstrations that these management practices, long developed by the smaller and more densely peopled countries across the Atlantic, could be equally as effective and profitable in the vast United States.³⁰ As one historian has aptly pointed out, US foresters sought to prove the applicability of European forestry practices “not by transforming the ideals of European silviculture to fit American forests, but by transforming American forests to fit European models.”³¹ When Cobb, Bond and foresters in the 1930s came to the outer banks, they looked at the barrier landscape and saw France.³²

Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁰ Brian Balogh, “Scientific Forestry and the Roots of the Modern American State: Gifford Pinchot’s Path to Progressive Reform,” *Environmental History*, vol. 7, no. 2 (April 2002), 211-216.

³¹ Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 104.

³² Cobb mentions the example of the French reclamation of Gascony in Cobb, “The North Carolina Coast,” 4-5; Bond, “Examination of the Sand Banks,” 46, mentions similar work done in Europe, and the similarity between his project and that undertaken at Gascony, along with the fame of the French project among American foresters suggests he was almost certainly referring to France or at least including that model; In local newspaper articles in October 1933, NC Chief Forester J.S. Holmes and developer-park advocate Frank Stick both mention France as a model for reforesting the barrier islands. See “Coastal Park Idea Will Mean Prosperity and Not Burdensome Restrictions to Dare Natives,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 6 Oct. 1933, and Frank Stick, “What Happened in Holland Can Easily Happen to North Carolina,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 13 Oct. 1933, section 2, p. 1.

The French precedent for coastal dune reforestation was widely known among American professional foresters. In the late 18th to early 19th centuries, French landscape engineers combated the migratory dunes that had been encroaching inland from the Gascony coast, threatening several villages with desolation. Beginning as a royal project under Louis XVI, and continuing, despite several lengthy pauses, through the Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte's reign, the restoration venture converted over 100,000 acres from rolling dunes into usable forests by building a coastal dune and sowing grasses and pines behind the shore. Stabilizing the land further enabled engineers to construct canals and drain the wetland areas to put the land to productive use. By the 1860s, Gascony hosted a major railroad line swiftly exporting the products of thriving timber and turpentine industries.³³

George Perkins Marsh praised the earlier French effort. Marsh's final chapter of *Man and Nature* was entitled "The Sands," and his centerpiece discussion focused on the late-eighteenth-century dune restoration efforts of France and Holland. Marsh's comments about the European projects reflect the prevailing ideas behind coastal decline and restoration that persisted among American foresters in the early 20th century. "Before the occupation of the coasts by civilized and therefore destructive man," Marsh wrote, "dunes, at all points where they have been observed seem to have been protected in their rear by forests . . . [I]n Europe . . . dunes . . . begin to protect themselves as soon as human trespassers are excluded."³⁴ On the French coast, those "trespassers" were pastoral peoples using the inter-dune meadows as grazing spaces for livestock—semi-feral horses, cows, and sheep—that the conceptual engineer of landscape restoration, Charlevoix de Villers, derided as being "just as wild as the

³³ Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 426-427.

³⁴ Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 412.

as the peasants who own them.”³⁵ De Villers’ strategy was to remove the herders and their stock from the controlled area for at least 15 years, then begin by building and vegetating a dune along the coast and work landward, planting grasses and pines to stabilize and reforest the sandy lands in the interest of the state. As de Villers put it, “it is necessary, besides being an urgent and infinite advantage, to fix the dunes . . . and make of these mountains of sand productive funds for the State . . . Commerce and the State, which are inseparable, will thereby gain a prodigious quantity of usable timber.”³⁶ For later conservationists, the rationalization of restoration was reversed—conservationists argued that the state should act in the interest of its citizens, not to increase federal revenues—but the effect was the same. Jay Bond’s proposal (not to mention his purpose) barely strayed from this early precedent, and Marsh certainly saw no conflict. In his concluding remarks about dune restoration, Marsh praised the French example as proof that at least some political leaders “are coming better to understand the true duties and interests of civilized government.”³⁷

The North Carolina government, however, took no action to stabilize dunes on the barrier coast. Partly this had to do with the unenthusiastic report Bond made in 1907 regarding the financial return the state could anticipate on reforesting the barrier islands. Timber resources, no longer navigation, were the forester’s major priority. “If prompt

³⁵ Pierre Buffault, *Histoire des Dunes Maritimes de la Gascogne*, (Paris: Edition Delmas, 1942), 121.

Translation by author. According to Buffault, the herders continued to use the dunes for pasture until the regional court at Bordeaux ruled that rights to graze in the dunes had never been granted. In Buffault’s words, the court ruled that “les troupeaux était errants et vivait á l’état sauvage.” In 1925, all of the remaining herds were rounded up and shot, under the supervision of the lieutenant of La Louveterie.

³⁶ Buffault, *Dunes Maritimes*, 149. Translation by author. Nicolas Brémontier is usually given credit for the French restoration project, so some readers may question why I referred to de Villers as having originally conceptualized the project. According to Buffault, much of the work was already outlined by de Villers when Buffault arrived, but de Villers, an aristocrat, was written out of the history when the project continued under the governments that followed Louis XVI’s ouster.

³⁷ Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 436.

measures, such as outlined above, are not taken,” Bond concluded, “the destruction of the forest is certain. The land will become a sand waste similar to the larger part of the area of the banks. The cost of the work, however, is large and it is doubted if the value of the property to be protected will equal this cost.”³⁸ The North Carolina Geological Survey, meanwhile, was having a difficult enough time just staying afloat. State senators threatened to dissolve NCGS repeatedly—in 1895, 1897, 1903, 1905, and 1911—before most embraced the conservation agenda by passing a series bills in 1915 that created a Fisheries Commission, established a fire law, allowed the state to purchase forests, and created Mount Mitchell State Park.³⁹ Before 1915, NCGS administrators could not purchase forests and thus could not have accepted Bond’s proposal whether they were inclined to or not.

North Carolina conservation projects through the 1920s largely focused on more supposedly certain and immediate boons to the state economy, such as preventing forest fires and draining large areas of eastern swamplands to bring under cultivation, rather than embracing peripheral and highly uncertain projects such as planting the barrier island dunes. The outer banks project ultimately had to await nationwide economic disaster. During the first years of the national Depression in the early 1930s, North Carolina governor O. Max Gardener advocated the recovery strategy common to many states, attempting to make government more efficient while resisting calls for a sales tax and refusing any legislation for social welfare, business regulation, or for protecting labor. Large-scale public works under such a plan were impossible, and work relief in North Carolina could only come through

³⁸ Bond, “Examination of the Sand Banks,” 47.

³⁹ Ross, “North Carolina Geological Survey,” 25-27.

federal intervention.⁴⁰ Like many hundreds of dormant conservation projects developed through the 1920s elsewhere, the project to reforest the outer banks revived with the accession of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the US presidency on March 4th, 1933.

Among many New Deal programs aimed at relieving unemployment and correcting both social and environmental disasters of the Depression, one of the earliest was to create a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) aimed at putting jobless urban male youths to work in state and national parks and “confining itself to forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control and similar projects.” In part, employing several hundred thousand young men in such a program, as Roosevelt explained to Congress, would “eliminate to some extent at least the threat that enforced idleness brings to spiritual and moral (not to mention social) stability.” FDR continued to argue for the economic logic of conservation as well. “I call your attention,” the new President said, “to the fact that this type of work is of definite, practical value, not only through the prevention of great present financial loss, but also as a means of creating future national wealth. This is brought home by the news we are receiving today of vast damage caused by floods on the Ohio and other rivers,” which FDR implied were more human than natural disasters, linked to increased runoff from deforestation.⁴¹

President Roosevelt, who spent years raising and selling forest crops on his Hyde Park estate, and who repeatedly listed his occupation as “tree grower” on his voting ballots,

⁴⁰ Anthony J. Badger, *North Carolina and the New Deal*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1981), 8-9, 12.

⁴¹ Roosevelt to the Congress, March 31, 1933, as reprinted in Edgar Nixon, comp. and ed., *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Conservation, 1911-1945*, (Hyde Park, NY: FDRL, 1957), 1:141-142. Nixon compiled and edited many of FDR’s speeches and correspondence regarding the conservation of natural resources into a two-volume set; Neil Maher, “‘A Conflux of Desire and Need,’ Trees, Boy Scouts, and the Roots of Franklin Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps,” in *FDR and the Environment*, ed. Henry L. Henderson and David B. Woolner, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 51-52.

was personally committed to conservation as a form of self-sufficiency and improvement. FDR was friends with Gifford Pinchot, sought his advice on forestry matters, and adopted the progressive emphasis on efficient and utilitarian resource use.⁴² Demonstrating his conservation ethos, FDR closed his inaugural address as governor of New York, on January 1st, 1929, exclaiming that “In the brief time I have been speaking to you, there has run to waste on these paths towards the sea, enough power from our rivers to have turned the wheels of a thousand factories, to have lit a million farmers’ homes.”⁴³ As president, Roosevelt intended to extend that reasoning nationally, to render US resource use more rational and efficient, and to do so in the interest of the destitute masses.

Granted unprecedented executive power by Congress, Roosevelt’s administration was well aware of the precarious constitutional basis of their reforms. To justify their programs, New Deal bureaucrats actively sought the consent of those whom their programs would regulate. Local voices lent recovery projects legitimacy.⁴⁴ On the Carolina banks, that local voice first came from Frank Stick, the developer and outdoorsman from New Jersey who was among the first to turn the Nags Head-Kitty Hawk area into speculative real estate. Stick was an early advocate of preserving the outer banks from runaway development by turning the seashore into a national public space, and his tireless promotion and organizing led to increased interest in the outer banks restoration project. In a majority of Outer Banks histories, authors cite Stick’s article published July 21st, 1933 in the *Elizabeth City Independent*, calling for “A Coastal Park for North Carolina and the Nation” as the impetus

⁴² Brian Black, “The Complex Environmentalist: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Ethos of New Deal Conservation,” in *FDR and the Environment*, ed. Henry L. Henderson and David B. Woolner, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 29-30.

⁴³ As quoted in A. L. Reisch Owen, *Conservation Under FDR*, (New York: Preager Publishers, 1983), 10.

⁴⁴ Badger, *North Carolina and the New Deal*, 13.

and initial outline of the restoration effort ultimately embraced by New Dealers. When explaining the origin of restoration on the banks, many have traced the idea back to Stick and not Jay Bond's 1907 report. In fact, though he later outlined the reforestation project in an article for *The State* under a similar title, Stick's earlier article does not mention restoration at all, and state foresters familiar with the Bond proposal who conversed with Stick during that interval clearly educated him on the details and benefits of forest "rehabilitation."⁴⁵ Stick's first article, however, reveals a great deal about what developers like him, the neo-locals who most actively supported the federal effort, hoped to gain from outside support.⁴⁶

Frank Stick's first article primarily advocated two goals: 1) turn the "lower banks," as they were often called at the time, south of Oregon Inlet into a National Park, and 2) construct a highway extending from the "Virginia-Dare Trail," the road that the state of North Carolina built from Kitty Hawk to Nags Head in 1931, southward to traverse all of the barrier islands to Cape Lookout. In promoting the park, which would exclude existing villages, Stick emphasized the recreational attraction of the seashore, and his arguments

⁴⁵ The confusion here over the substance of Frank Stick's original article and that proposed later is mostly due to the account in the most widely read Outer Banks history, that of Frank's son David Stick, the best known local historian. The problem is that David's account makes it seem as if his father created the restoration idea, when it was clearly initiated over 15 years earlier and conveyed to Frank Stick after he met with state conservation leaders following his initial park proposal. David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 247. That account has been repeated, almost without exception, even in well-researched studies on the topic. See Robert D. Behn and Martha A. Clark, *Termination II: How the National Park Service Annulled Its "Commitment" to a Beach Erosion Control Policy at Cape Hatteras*, (Durham: Center for Policy Analysis, Duke University, 1976), 9; and most recently an administrative history of the Cape Hatteras Seashore does accurately represent the initial article, but then blends its message seamlessly with the quite different message in Stick's later article. Tellingly, the author cites only David Stick's work and Frank Stick's later article published months later in *The State* magazine. See Cameron Binkley, *The Creation and Establishment of Cape Hatteras National Seashore: The Great Depression Through Mission 66*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, 2007), 6-7; Frank Stick met with state forester, J.S. Holmes on September 26, 1933.

⁴⁶ The term "neo-locals" is borrowed from Hal Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). Rothman's history of tourism in the West describes in much the same way the influx of newcomers who claim local status in popular tourist destinations, and who make themselves the new custodians of those places.

followed those formulated earlier by him and his associates when boosting their development south of Kitty Hawk, the Virginia Dare Shores. Beautiful coastal shores, which offer “more to the general public than can the most inspiring stretch of mountains, the most impressive forests, or the clearest of lakes or streams,” were disappearing nationwide in the face of widespread development. “[W]e who are native to [the banks],” wrote Stick who had invested in the North Carolina shore in 1927 and moved permanently to Manteo only in 1929, “appreciate the romance” of the coast. The lower banks were “the last great stretch of ocean frontage available on the Atlantic coast, Today,” and the land was “ridiculously cheap.” “A tract twenty-five miles in length . . . could be taken over for less than the price of five miles of concrete highway.” Stick also employed the strategies of real estate boosterism. Much as Nags Head area promoters had been doing for years, Stick evoked connections to national identity, emphasizing in three separate paragraphs the proximity to Roanoke Island “where American civilization saw its birth,” and also highlighting in bold letters the way in which roads and automobiles annihilated space, allowing the seashore to “be reached in less than twenty-four hours, by fifty million of our populace.” Almost as an aside, but clearly of importance to Stick, he included in the plan a limited wildlife sanctuary for the migratory waterfowl that converged each winter on the marshes lining the North Carolina coast. A road traversing the islands, nearly 150 miles in length, was to serve as the public works project, and it would make the new seashore park accessible to the general public. By creating a park and building a road, the plan sought to appeal to the mandate for public works projects

elsewhere. Stick included a map showing geographic detail of the plan, and on it he proposed a name: the Franklin D. Roosevelt Coastal Park.⁴⁷

Frank Stick was undoubtedly sincere in his desire to preserve the lower banks from the drastic modification of development. As his son explained it, a few years after developing the Kill Devil Hills area the avid hunter and fisherman Frank Stick “began to see that in the very process of developing they were destroying what attracted people here in the first place.”⁴⁸ Hatteras Islanders had been driving cars along sand tracks and along the beach by the early 1920s, and even before the building of the Virginia-Dare Trail in 1931 between Kitty Hawk and Nags Head on the northern banks, local papers had been demanding that the state continue a road southward to serve Hatteras Islanders.⁴⁹ Indeed, when Stick wrote his piece, he knew that such a road was possibly in the making. In May of 1933, Senator Josiah Bailey wrote to governor Ehringhaus proposing that the state apply for federal work relief funds to build a such a road down the banks.⁵⁰ Stick, who mentioned that plan in his article, probably saw that road as inevitable. And constructing a road, Stick knew from experience, would enhance the land value and thus the dynamics of development along the banks. As he stated it, “no sooner is the first transit sighted down the beach than values will increase . . .

⁴⁷ Frank Stick, “A Coastal Park for North Carolina and the Nation,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 21 July 1933, pp.3. It should be pointed out that the boundaries for a national coastal park were not well defined. Stick left the boundary question vague in his original article, never mentioning precise limits, though a map accompanied the article showing the park ending south of Nags Head. When the Park Service surveyed the US coastal areas in 1934, it also considered making a national park of the Nags Head-Kitty Hawk area. This question remained open until the build-up on the northern banks following World War II, after which the land value became prohibitively expensive. It is likely that Frank Stick thought of the benefits to his property of a coastal park, but he also supported the park during the 1930s and 1940s in whatever guise it took.

⁴⁸ David Stick, interview by author, Kitty Hawk, NC, 16 April 2007.

⁴⁹ Stick, *Outer Banks*, 246; Dewey Basnett, “Old Cars on Hatteras Island,” *Sea Chest*, vol.3, no.1 (Fall-Winter, 1975), 37-38; W. O. Saunders, “Road to Cape Henry from Cape Lookout,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 24 June 1927.

⁵⁰ Senter, “Ghost Forests,” 346. Senter cites correspondence from both the Lindsay Warren papers, from UNC’s collection, and the Josiah Bailey papers, held at Duke University.

Real estate speculators will swarm our coasts, intent upon reaping a quick profit.”⁵¹ Stick knew this because he helped create the same dynamic on the northern banks. Withdrawing the land along the lower banks would give locals their road and preserve the land from private speculation, but it would also limit growth and competition for existing developments. Much as had been the experience when Congress funded a Wright brothers’ memorial, a project only finally realized less than a year before Stick’s proposal, Nags Head-Kitty Hawk area developers’ property would be much more valued for its restricted space beside a federally-promoted recreational area.

Stick’s was only one proposal among many for a federal park in eastern North Carolina.⁵² Stick’s promotion, however, garnered the attention of some connected people who took interest in the project, including R. Bruce Etheridge, head of the Geological Survey’s successor, the NC Department of Conservation and Development, who was from Dare County and was, in fact, a vice president of the Kill Devil Hills Memorial Association that helped promote banks development. Lindsay Warren, the influential congressman of North Carolina’s first district, which included Dare County, also actively supported the park idea.⁵³ Weather additionally played an important role. In late August of 1933 a category two hurricane struck the North Carolina coast, followed by a category three hurricane in mid-September. Combined, the storms devastated the coastal areas and left in their wake more property damage than North Carolinians had ever previously experienced. One report from Ocracoke claimed that four feet of water covered the island. The recent “New Inlet,” a

⁵¹ Stick, “A Coastal Park,” *Elizabeth City Independent*.

⁵² Various proposals for federal parks in eastern North Carolina, including one with a detailed map, can be found in the NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, Federal Government 1926-1935, National Forests Eastern NC 1933 folder.

⁵³ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 9-10.

common name throughout banks history for fresh breaks through the islands, cut above Rodanthe in 1932 to once again separate Pea Island from the northern part of Hatteras Island, now widened and deepened, and new inlets carved through Core and, temporarily, Currituck banks.⁵⁴ At Nags Head, response to the storm was panicked. Despite “native” Frank Stick’s assurance in his park proposal that “Tornadoes have never visited this region, and high winds are a rarity,” real locals knew well what recent investors finally realized in 1933. The banks were volatile; the shoreline moved. Those who owned oceanfront property near the Virginia-Dare Trail began to see their investment literally eroding into the sea. Claims and fears that the banks could erode entirely helped to get the state interested in planting the islands of loose sand.⁵⁵

At Etheridge’s request, North Carolina’s State Forester, J.S. Holmes, met with Stick and D.B. Fearing, Chairman of the Board of Commissioners for Dare County in Manteo on September 26th, 1933. Holmes drafted a report immediately afterward calling both for a restoration project, very similar to Jay Bond’s proposal, and, as Stick suggested, to construct a road and turn the land over to the federal government as a national park or a national forest. The road straddled these two projects. Holmes cited the destruction of sections of the recently completed Virginia Dare Trail from Kitty Hawk to Nags Head in the 1933 storms as evidence not that barrier island roads were impractical but rather that the coastline should be

⁵⁴ Jay Barnes, *North Carolina’s Hurricane History*, revised and updated edition, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 67-73; “Storm Damage to Dare County May Never be Figured Out,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 22 Sept. 1933, pp. 2; “Nature Again Conspires to Fill Currit’k Sound with Salt Water,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 3 Nov. 1933.

⁵⁵ Stick, “A Coastal Park,” *Elizabeth City Independent*; Following the storms and J.S. Holmes’ visit to Manteo, an article in the local paper argued that the islands risked washing away and that the banks needed to be re-vegetated through scientific planning. “Preservation of Eastern Carolina Depends Upon Coastal Development,” *Elizabeth City Independent*, 29 September 1933. The idea that the barrier islands would wash out to sea remained a prevalent argument throughout the project.

remade to support a road that he argued “is greatly needed.”⁵⁶ Stick, whose credentials were immediately promoted to “landscape engineer,” was enlisted to advance the project by drafting an outline of arguments and goals for a newly created North Carolina Coastal Development Council to present to state and federal officials.⁵⁷ Though Holmes did not include the problem of eroding barrier islands in his report, three days after his visit, a local Elizabeth City newspaper carried the headline “Preservation of Eastern Carolina Depends upon Coastal Development.” The article warned that the North Carolina banks might wash away and that the land needed “reforestation” and “scientific planting.” For the first time in a public forum, the banks environment was said to have declined from its historic productivity, and the editor blamed locals’ land use practices, including logging and grazing livestock, for that decline.⁵⁸

To contend that the outer banks landscape had been devastated was to make a historical argument. It assumed early accounts, primarily Arthur Barlowe’s 1584 report of finding extensive forests, were fully accurate and took one point in time—pre-European contact—and declared the condition prevailing at that time to be *the* natural condition, a

⁵⁶ J.S. Holmes, “Report on the ‘Banks’ of Dare County,” no date, but is explicitly a report following the 26 Sept. 1933 trip, which is mentioned. NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, Dare Coast 1933 folder; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 9.

⁵⁷ Frank Stick, “North Carolina Development Council: Proposed Coastal Park and Forest Reserve. Location, Sand Fixation, Erosion Control, Etc.,” 5 Oct. 1933, NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region, Frank Stick—Coastal Development Commission 1933 folder. Stick is listed (lists himself?) as a “landscape engineer” on this document. Stick’s outline in this document anticipates his later, and much more often cited, published piece, Frank Stick, “A Coastal Park for North Carolina,” *The State*, vol. 1, no. 25 (18 Nov. 1933), 18, 22.

⁵⁸ “Preservation of Eastern Carolina Depends upon Coastal Development,” Elizabeth City *Independent*, 29 Sept. 1933.

stable, unchanging reality.⁵⁹ The declension argument assumed not only that Native Americans did not shape the land, which they certainly did, but also that the landscape existed in a kind of general stasis. Natural state and stability, on barrier islands as on the mainland, seemed to go hand in hand.

The “sand fixation” project to restore forests to the Outer Banks and protect the beaches from erosion converged over the shared goal of stability. Stabilizing the barrier islands meant building a large inward sloping barrier dune just back of the beach crest, between 8 to 25 feet high, varying from 40 to 200 feet wide, and running the length of the coast from the Virginia border to Ocracoke Inlet. Constructed by the low-tech method of using wood and brush fences to catch blowing sand, much like the French precedent, the barrier dune would prevent beach sands from being carried across the islands by storm surges, and a re-planted forest could emerge behind the sand barrier. Once clothed in grasses, the constructed dune would theoretically fix and protect the islands forever and restore nature’s balance. Project proposals, however, called not only for stability but permanence. Observers remarked the volatile nature of the banks in 1933, but that condition, project proponents argued, was historical, contingent on improper use of resources, and thus

⁵⁹ Many project proposals made reference to Barlowe’s account, and the original condition was repeatedly compared to what Raleigh’s colonists saw. In one memorandum in which policy suggestions were made to the Park Service for future planning in 1938, the several signatories made this point most explicit: “The area should be maintained as nearly as possible in a natural condition. By ‘natural condition’ is meant a condition similar to that which existed prior to the arrival of European colonists in 1584.” H.S. Ladd et al. Memo to the Regional Director, 28 May 1938, National Archive, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Branch of Forestry, Correspondence and Subject Files 1928-1959, Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreation Area, Planting folder; The superintendent of the 1930s restoration effort, A.C. Stratton submitted a comprehensive report in 1940 in which he likewise asserted a return to Barlowe’s outer banks was the goal, A.C. Stratton and James R. Hallowell, *Methods of Sand Fixation and Beach Erosion Control* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, Dept of the Interior, 1940); Nancy Langston makes a similar critique of forestry practices in managing the Blue Mountains even into the 1990s. Foresters are supposed to manage the forests as they were “originally” before whites arrived, even though most ecologists agree that a single original forest is a myth, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares*, 6.

unnecessary and controllable. Because conservationists saw the goal as restoration, their strategy envisioned a temporary mobilization to create a lasting result. As one NC Department of Conservation and Development official boldly insisted, “the feasibility and permanence of the construction is beyond question.”⁶⁰

By restoring permanent stability, New Deal conservationists had two goals for the nature of the banks. First, the sand fixation project attempted to regain the presupposed original condition of the land. NC Department of Conservation and Development officials argued that what they sought to construct had clear historical precedent. “[T]hroughout almost the entire length of beach remain evidences of the line of barrier dunes which at one time held back the ocean tides,” one report argued. The shoreline dune they sought to construct as the centerpiece of stabilization was not to be created, but rather rebuilt. The “marketable timber (that) existed over fully eighty per cent of the territory,” was to be restored through planting.⁶¹ The outer banks barriers also shielded large and productive estuarine environments from the salinity and forceful currents of the ocean. Any changes to those lands, therefore, altered the salinity and ecology of the sounds. Reforesting the banks, many claimed, would diminish the volatility of inlets by keeping channels of passage from shoaling and slowing inlet migration. Oceanic overwash was also seen as creating unpredictable change that, in dumping greater quantities of sand and saltwater into the sounds than shoreline dunes would permit, was at the same time unnatural and undesirable. Overwash displaced sand from where it should be, the ocean-side beaches, and dumped it

⁶⁰ The most thorough outline created by the NC Department of Conservation and Development, from which the quote (pp.6) also derives, is unsigned. “North Carolina Coastal Development: Description, Objectives, Estimates,” NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, North Carolina Coastal Development folder.

⁶¹ Stick, “North Carolina Coastal Development Council,” NC State Archives.

into the sounds where it was not wanted. The 1933 hurricanes, a state official claimed, “covered with sand at least seventy-five percent of the best (sound) bottoms,” for oyster cultivation, killing off great quantities of planted oyster beds. Preventing overwash and stabilizing inlets would enable managers to “maintain proper salinity” in the sounds, and thus ensure a healthy, supposedly natural environment for valuable fisheries.⁶² Restoration, advocates argued, would mitigate all of these problems in unison by re-creating a more normal, predictable, and supposedly natural condition that existed before European arrival.

Secondly, despite their rhetoric justifying landscape engineering by appealing to the past, New Deal conservationists were not simply seeking to restore the land. Conservation was never an argument exclusively for conserving or restoring resources; scientific managers’ goal, rather, was optimal productivity. Foresters, for instance, did not allow forests to reach the climax state of “old growth,” which they assumed was most natural, because it was wasteful for timbering. As French forester J.J. Jusserand proclaimed in his address at the first proceedings for the US Forest Service in 1905, “forests need the eye, the mind, and the heart of man. Instead of being full of the most beautiful and useful trees, the wild forest offers, by comparison, a prodigiously small quantity of good trees; many have outlived their period of use, and they prevent the growth of others; many have grown crooked; wicked ones have injured the righteous.”⁶³ Those outlining the banks project in 1933 likewise never intended simply to return to a natural state, but to improve on nature.

⁶² All quotes are from the unsigned document cited in footnote 52, “North Carolina Coastal Development: Description, Objectives, Estimates,” NC State Archive.

⁶³ J.J. Jusserand, “The Forestry Policy of France,” *Proceedings of the American Forest Congress*, (Washington, DC: H.M. Sutter Publishing Company, 1905), 27-28; Arthur McEvoy also makes a similar point, outlining the idea of “sustained yield” in fisheries, in “Toward an Interactive Theory of Natural and Culture: Ecology, Production, and Cognition in the California Fishing Industry,” in *The Ends of the Earth*, ed. Donald Worster, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 220-221.

Scientific management would make the forests more productive than ever before. With a dune line along the shore to protect the land from the ocean, a road could be constructed that would make the beach accessible and also allow locals to take timber and fish products efficiently to market. Dunes would also allow property owners to safely build across the island flats, increasing the area of developable land. Conservationist sought to ditch and drain the sound-side marshes to reduce mosquito breeding grounds and create more solid land. And planners hoped to install jetties on both sides of each inlet along the banks, which it was thought would fix them in place, and to dredge channels to ensure stable lanes of passage and predictable productivity for fisheries in the sounds.⁶⁴ In many ways this ‘brave new banks’ would be superior to anything that Raleigh’s sixteenth-century adventurers saw.

As landscape engineers sought to construct a new nature on the outer banks, it was clear from the beginning that any governmental effort would necessitate continued control of lands being improved or restored. Though Frank Stick lobbied hard for a national park that would preserve natural space for recreational use, it was at first unclear what federal agency would administer the land and thus how resources would be used. If future forests were to be administered by the Department of Agriculture as Jay Bond had proposed, they would be national forests, regulated but available for local extraction. Was the Interior Department to control the islands, however, the banks would be managed as a park, a space for preserved nature and recreation. As a park, the banks would appeal to national sentiment in ways that federally managed forests did not, and park promoters exploited this sentiment. Every

⁶⁴ Many of these goals are laid out in Frank Stick’s and J.S. Holmes’ proposals, but they are most thoroughly detailed and brought together in the NC Department of Conservation and Development’s unsigned proposal, “North Carolina Coastal Development: Description, Objectives, Estimates,” NC State Archive.

proposal for restoration work on the Carolina banks made certain to mention the proximity to the soon-to-be nationalized space of “Fort Raleigh,” the site of the Roanoke Island ‘Lost Colony,’ and many reminded their audience that the Kill Devil Hills monument to the Wright brothers was already a national space. Indeed, some park advocates discussed the possible national coastal park as essentially an extension of the monument to the Wrights.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, as the nationwide appeal for New Deal funds forced rushed and sometimes haphazard project proposals, it remained unclear what form federal control would take even as the project was getting underway. Paul Kelly, assistant director of the NC Department of Conservation and Development, put the matter to Stick bluntly in early October 1933, writing “it might not be well to insist too strongly on the establishment of a National Monument (meaning a preserved park area for recreation) at the seclusion [*sic*] of other Federal Reserves such as a National Forest which might offer greater opportunities for development . . . [T]he main task is to bring the area . . . under Federal ownership.”⁶⁶

Posited as reforestation and erosion control on future public lands, and requiring the unskilled labor of hundreds of male bodies, the banks project fit into the model of ventures undertaken elsewhere by the newly created Civilian Conservation Corps. Yet the Corps

⁶⁵ The Roanoke Colonists were mentioned on every document created by the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development proposing a reforestation program and potential park. When the National Park Service evaluated potential seashore parks along the Atlantic coast in 1934, the proposed different strips of the North Carolina banks as possibilities, and in each case the proximity to the monuments to the Wrights and the Roanoke Colonists were mentioned. See for instance “Report on Proposed National Park, Near Nags Head, N.C.” National Archive, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, National Park Service, Region I, Central Files 1934-1944, Proposed Seashore Recreation Areas, Proposed National Beach Parks, Nags Head North Carolina folder; The proposed park was likened to an extension of the Wright Memorial in a letter, Oliver G. Taylor to Conrad Wirth, 25 September 1934, National Archive, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, National Park Service, Region I, Central Files 1934-1944, Proposed Seashore Recreation Areas, Proposed National Beach Parks North Carolina, Kitty Hawk-Hatteras folder.

⁶⁶ Paul Kelly to Frank Stick, 4 Oct. 1933, NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, Frank Stick—Coastal Development Commission 1933 folder.

could not at first come to the banks because most of the land remained in private ownership. Instead, transient laborers organized through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and supervised by the North Carolina Division of Forestry, began arriving in early March of 1934.⁶⁷ Disorganized and undermanned, work met with limited success until the WPA and then the CCC took over sand fixation and erosion control work along the banks the following year. Islanders gained employment in the WPA, which had them construct buildings and ditch and drain wetland areas. The 1,500 Conservation Corps boys in scattered camps across the banks, however, were largely non-local North Carolinians, and they were tasked with the central work, building dunes with sand fences and planting native grasses, trees, and shrubs across the islands. According to the project superintendent, A.C. Stratton, between 1935 and 1941 CCC workers erected four million feet of sand fences to create shoreline dunes, planted 284 million square feet of grass, and planted almost three and half million trees and shrubs.⁶⁸ Hailing the end result a resounding success, Stratton wrote in his final report, “Instead of a barren sand swept stretch of beach, it has been transformed to an area not unlike its original condition.”⁶⁹

Re-creating the original nature of the outer banks proved exceedingly problematic. To restore natural space was always an act of creation. Conservationists transformed a landscape from what was to what should be based on an imagined ideal state. On the banks, attempting to return to the “nature” assumed by policymakers in the 1930s was actually to massively

⁶⁷ “First Units of 200 Transients on Federal Relief Work About to Move Into Dare County,” *Elizabeth City, Independent*, 9 March 1934.

⁶⁸ A.C. Stratton, “Reclaiming the North Carolina ‘Banks’,” *Shore and Beach* (April 1943): 25-27, 32; Different employments between CCC and WPA is recounted in *Ethnohistorical Description*, 196.

⁶⁹ Stratton, *Methods of Sand Fixation and Beach Erosion Control* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, Dept of the Interior, 1940), 90.

engineer the landscape in an unprecedented manner. New Deal conservation on the outer banks proved problematic despite the best intentions of very intelligent professional scientists because they imported models from mainland environments and imposed them on barrier islands, where they did not nicely fit. In the timbered or cultivated lands that foresters like Holmes knew, rapid environmental change was congruous with decline; on the outer banks, volatility was the norm. The assumptions of scientific professionals in the 1930s remained intact for another four decades, when scientists drew new conceptual maps, leading to endless difficult management decisions for the Park Service. That issue will be taken up later. The point here, however, is not faulty science but rather the social meaning of restoration.

Earlier conservationists sought primarily to restore and regulate resources for optimal output in the supposed interest of all national citizens, though in ways that frequently favored large corporations, and locals often did not directly benefit. New Deal conservation had a somewhat different approach. FDR's support for conservation was likewise largely an economic argument, but an underlying ethic of social justice underlay New Deal programs more generally. As several scholars have recently argued, New Deal conservation programs emphasized social equity for locals in a way largely absent from the progressive conservation agenda—to rehabilitate the farmer along with the farm, or to provide power and modern amenities to those in poor rural areas and control flood waters through a series of hydroelectric dams. New Deal leaders undertook public works projects not only in the interest of an amorphous national public, but also to serve the interest of locals and keep

them on the land.⁷⁰ Under the mandate of FDR's New Deal, the purpose of conservation, even if in many cases that purpose was not realized, transformed from what was profitable to what was also justifiable as a social benefit for both a national and a localized public.

Conservationists rationalized and prioritized resource use for the greater good by the standard of a resource's "best use," in the context of how that use would serve people and influence other resources. "Best Use" was a key concept in conservation thinking, and this concept's evolution reflected the changing goals of scientific management. Whereas best use even of seashore areas previously emphasized utilitarian resource production, by 1930 this was no longer so clear. Increasing American moves toward beaches in the 1920s and an expanding resort development around Nags Head altered the terms of restoration. As tourism entailed new ways to make marginal lands productive, new economic and cultural variables entered to change the terms of the debate between recreational and extractive uses of the Outer Banks. With this new logic added to the Spears-Throop argument, scientific managers sought to determine best use and act in the interest of public welfare. But such a determination was a contentious process that depended on an elastic meaning of the word "public." After all, who made up "the public" and what were their interests? On the banks, claims of speaking for "locals" often favored interests of the politically connected, real estate

⁷⁰ Clayton Koppes, "Efficiency, Equity, Esthetics: Shifting Themes in American Conservation," in *The Ends of the Earth*, ed. Donald Worster, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 233-251. Koppes argues that the goals of conservation can be reduced to efficiency, equity, esthetics, and that equity was a more prominent conservation goal under the New Deal than ever before or after, as many of the projects intended to benefit locals—exemplified by the TVA and BPA—in the end served other, more powerful interests. The New Deal emphasis on conservation with social equity was also more recently argued by John Sears and Paul Sutter in separate essays published in the same book. See John Sears, "Grass Roots Democracy: FDR and the Land," pp. 15, and Paul Sutter, "New Deal Conservation: A View from the Wilderness," pp. 97-99, in *FDR and the Environment*, ed. Henry L. Henderson and David B. Woolner, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

men like Frank Stick. Determining the purpose of restored lands was thus to make a claim for public interest that often favored some “publics” over others.

Early plans for the outer banks restoration project, however, reveal serious considerations about how the land would be used to serve several local constituencies. The dunes that were the central object of the restoration effort would stabilize the banks, planners thought, and stability would serve the interests of all. Dunes promised neo-locals and villagers alike, however much they may have hoped for or doubted the outcome, that they would no longer have to live reactively to the natural fluctuations of the coast. Restoring the land to its natural stability would likewise stabilize and make permanent productive relationships to the land, whether that meant forests, roads, or beaches.

Beaches were from the beginning seen as recreational spaces, and planners assumed a road would soon split the islands between the ocean and the sounds to serve tourists, developers, and villagers alike. Uses of forests, on the other hand, were more contested. According to North Carolina Chief Forester J.S. Holmes’ original project outline in 1933, reforestation and stabilizing the banks would make it “one of the finest recreational areas in the country.” But Holmes also argued that “The first object of the whole project would be for the benefit of the local residents,” and that forests should be managed in locals’ economic interests and used in ways that allowed for previous practices to continue. Therefore, though livestock would have to be removed to initiate the forests, which they eventually were in 1935, “afterwards,” Holmes wrote, “a limited number of livestock, certainly enough to furnish milk to the local residents, can be kept on the ‘Banks’.” In Holmes’ vision, the land would not be used entirely as recreational space or exclusively for industry. Instead, the land

would be divided up according to each area's ability to serve the interests of separate users. As Holmes wrote, "Each special part of the 'Banks' should be devoted to its best use, part of it should be managed for timber production, [other] areas for bathing beaches, considerable areas should be devoted to wildlife refuges while public shooting grounds should be established here and there."⁷¹ It was in this basic vision that the sand fixation project began. By creating a beach park, national forests, and wildlife reserves, those interested in the outer banks would have recreational areas, biological preservation, and extractive industry too.

Multiple voices, on the other hand, saw the restoration project only in terms of creating a recreational park. Events far removed from North Carolina, though potentially related to the banks project, shifted the purpose of the restoration decidedly in the direction of recreation. By 1934, National Park Service administrators expressed great interest in establishing a new type of landholding, a seashore park, to be preserved from mounting coastal development as a recreational beach for national public use. That year the Park Service conducted a nation-wide coastal survey for which they inspected 49 possible strips of shoreline to become a national seashore park.⁷² Their gaze settled on the Carolina coast out of a marriage of state and federal interests. Though the Carolina Banks area received only a lukewarm review, it was clear in 1935, when the state of North Carolina passed legislation permitting such a park, that Cape Hatteras would be the most promising area for a national seashore, and Park Service officials hoped that Hatteras would serve as a prototype for any

⁷¹ J.S. Holmes, "Report on the 'Banks' of Dare County, North Carolina," report following trip made on 26 Sept. 1933, NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, North Carolina Coastal Region 1925-1935, Dare Coast 1933 folder.

⁷² "Summary of Reports on National Seashore Parks," 14 November 1934, National Archives, College Park MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Miscellaneous Administrative Records 1930-1968, No folder.

future seashores.⁷³ In anticipation of eventual acquisition, the Park Service took over administration of the CCC sand fixation project in 1936, and Congress passed legislation the following year (1937) to establish a Cape Hatteras National Seashore contingent, because the Park Service was legally unable to purchase land to create a park, on the donation of at least 10,000 acres of land.⁷⁴

In the enabling legislation, the terms of the park mandated that federal lands included within park boundaries “shall be permanently reserved as a primitive wilderness.”⁷⁵ But park planners also made a commitment to local villagers by explicitly excluding the existing villages from the park, thus precluding the type of forced removal that was typical of earlier national parks in the West and even of the Smokey Mountains a few years earlier. Not only

⁷³ In a letter to Park Service District Officer, H.E. Weatherwax, L.A. Sharpe who conducted the survey to examine the feasibility of Cape Hatteras as a national park opined that “I could not see the possibility of using this as a National Beach Park . . . It is true that there is a great deal of beach available, which however is not easily accessible. The maps of this area show that the mainland of the whole coast with little exception is largely swamp.” L.A. Sharpe to H.E. Weatherwax, 23 September 1934, National Archive, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, National Park Service, Region I, Central Files 1934-1944, Proposed Seashore Recreation Areas, Proposed National Beach Parks North Carolina, Kitty Hawk folder. See also the official report, L.A. Sharpe, “Report—Reconnaissance of the Coast Line of the States of North and South Carolina—National Beach Park (August 27th-September 5th 1934),” National Archive, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, National Park Service, Region I, Central Files 1934-44, Proposed Seashore Recreation Areas, Proposed National Beach Parks, Kitty Hawk-Hatteras folder; “John Phipps’ Deed,” National Archive, College Park MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Miscellaneous Administrative Records 1930-1968, Proposed State Parks folder. Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 11-12, 17, claimed that the Park Service’s coastal survey looked most favorable on Hatteras and thus chose that area for the first park, but an examination of the survey report suggests otherwise. More probably, the North Carolina state government’s move to enable land donations for a park in 1935, and a lack of such interest in other states, compelled the Park Service to most seriously consider Hatteras.

⁷⁴ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 207; “An Act: To provide for the establishment of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in the State of North Carolina, and for other purposes,” Public bill No. 311, 75th Congress, Chapter 687, 1st Session, H.R. 7022, copy from the National Archives, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Branch of Forestry, Correspondence and Subject Files 1928-1959, Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area, Forestry General folder.

⁷⁵ “An Act: To provide for the establishment of the Cape Hatteras,” National Archives. Paul Sutter argued, quite convincingly, that the idea of preserving wilderness was largely a reaction to automobile traffic and the proliferation of roads in public parks, from the 1910s to the 1930s, in *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002). The language of the enabling legislation for the Cape Hatteras Park reflects this concern with wilderness among National Park Service personnel by 1937.

would locals be allowed to stay, but park policy, the document went on to say, would ensure that commercial fishermen could continue to make a living through their industry, and a later amendment allowed for limited waterfowl hunting areas for sportsmen.⁷⁶ But, despite J.S. Holmes' earlier ideal, allowing cattle back onto the banks would be much more difficult than removing them in the first place. Under this new program, the forests that Conservation Corps boys were apparently re-creating would not be a part of local industries. A series of Park Service timber surveys of existing forests conducted in 1938 concurred: the stunted and often twisted live oak-pine-cedar forests of the Outer Banks were useful as recreational areas, spaces where a vacationing public might enjoy camping, but they were rather worthless as timber stands after all.⁷⁷ Instead of reviving timber crops, the Park Service promised to make the banks land productive for locals in a new way—by attracting outside dollars through tourism rather than industry. Any future forests would be nice to look at, valuable to study, but set aside from productive use.

In 1941, repositioning the national economy to support the Allied war effort in Europe, the federal government phased out the largely completed outer banks restoration project. The effort to create a national seashore park before that time, however, had failed. Throughout the New Deal years after the Park Service enabled a Cape Hatteras park, Frank

⁷⁶ “An Act: To provide for the establishment of the Cape Hatteras,” National Archives; An amendment to the original Act, passed 29 June 1940, allowed for hunting and changed the name of the proposed park from the Cape Hatteras National Seashore to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area, to emphasize that the primary use would be recreational, NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, Parks 1936-1941, Cape Hatteras Seashore 1938-1941 folder; Forced removal is an unfortunate legacy of many very worthwhile national parks, including the Great Smoky Mountains. The Park Service has largely come to terms with this past, and removal is included as part of the interpretation of park histories on the official websites. The Smoky Mountains brief official history is at <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/historyculture/stories.htm>, accessed 10 March 2008.

⁷⁷ This was the conclusion reached by Sylvan Settel, Sr. Foreman Forester for the Beach Erosion Control Project, who undertook forest surveys for Nags Head Woods, Kitty Hawk Woods, and the woods of Collington Islands in 1938. The surveys are cited above in note 62.

Stick had been secretary of the North Carolina Cape Hatteras Seashore Commission, in charge of procuring land donations. He successfully obtained 2,700-acres in donation of the cape area from two gun clubs belonging to the family of Henry Phipps.⁷⁸ Due to unclear bureaucratic authority and slow land surveys to delimit property boundaries, problems well outside of Stick's control and about which he expressed repeated frustrations, multiple promises from other club owners, seeking to dump land that had been reduced during the Depression to tax burdens, fell through.⁷⁹ The Seashore Commission remained well short of the 10,000-acre minimum. By the time the United States entered World War II, the banks were walled from the ocean by a series of large dunes and were heavily planted, but no road sat behind the dunes. Outside of a national wildlife refuge established on Pea Island (the northern section of Hatteras Island) in 1936, no governmental body owned great stretches of the banks. Ironically, though Frank Stick was often afterward credited with initiating and outlining the outer banks project, the two things he most desired—a park and a road—remained elusive.

For approximately a decade the park idea froze, creating an uncertain future for the outer banks. Though the Seashore Commission continued to function to accept donations for

⁷⁸ The Phipps family made multiple donations. The first was slightly over 1,000 acres and included the Cape area, and it was the essential donation for initiating the park. "John Phipps' Deed," National Archive, College Park MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Miscellaneous Administrative Records 1930-1968, Proposed State Parks folder; The final acreage of all donations is listed in "Compromises Made to Build Park," *The Virginian Pilot*, Norfolk-Portsmouth, Virginia, 19 August 1962.

⁷⁹ By 1940, Frank Stick told the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Commission that he had probable donations amounting to 9,000 acres, though Stick argued that the donations had been delayed because of "the lack of boundary surveys." "Meeting of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Commission," 12 September 1940, and "Cape Hatteras National Seashore Commission, Board Room," 16 December 1940, both in the same folder, NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, Parks 1936-1941, Cape Hatteras Seashore 1938-1941 folder. In part, the gun club owners thought their landholdings would not regain their value because of an eel grass blight that began in 1933 and destroyed much of the potential food for migrating waterfowl. Many locals who lived through the 1930s remember seeing birds, especially brant, starving and dying in the North Carolina sounds. The eel grass recovered only in the mid-1950s.

the park into the early 1940s, it was not at all certain in the postwar period that the islands would be used for their magnificent beaches. Extractive industries threatened to drastically transform uses of the land. In 1944, Standard Oil and Sinclair Oil leased mineral rights covering most of the outer banks area, and while they drilled, ultimately unsuccessfully, for oil, Dare County suspended any land donations for the park. But a large derrick erected near the Cape Hatteras lighthouse in 1945 conveyed a clear message: the future of the banks was uncertain. The two towers—one a historic-cum-romantic landmark beside the other, a steel structure of pure industrial utility—symbolized the divergent possibilities for the postwar banks. Landowners who once supported the park soon found reasons to oppose it.⁸⁰ If oil industries or tourism followed the war, those holding title to real estate stood to benefit.

As oil derricks dotted Hatteras Island, in 1948 the US Atomic Energy Commission considered blowing the place up. In a contingency report for what was called “Project Nutmeg,” investigators looking for a postwar atomic test site asserted that a continental site in a western state was preferable; however, the idea of potential radioactive fallout over US populations, while not seen as a serious actual concern, may have proved politically untenable. In that case, a site along the Carolina banks could be chosen, and prevailing winds would carry fallout into the Atlantic and the Gulf Stream, which, the Energy Commission asserted, would not affect American populations or major fisheries. Planners considered test

⁸⁰ “The Story of North Carolina Esso No. 1,” Pamphlet produced by Standard Oil regarding the first unsuccessful drilling attempt at Hatteras near the lighthouse, no publication information or date given, though apparently published in 1947 or late 1946 as it anticipates the next drill site, Esso No. 2, offshore, which was staked out in October 1946, the last date given, but the new derrick was not yet completed. The pamphlet is available at the North Carolina State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, State Advertising Division, County Source File 1937-1961, Dare County folder. The cover shows both the cape derrick and the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, which seem to be no more than a mile apart; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 69-72; David Stick, “The Cape Hatteras National Seashore,” unpublished report, David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center, 44-49.

sites on Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands, but they determined Portsmouth Bank, just south of Ocracoke Inlet, to be “an exceptionally favorable site for nuclear tests.”⁸¹ In the late 1940s it was unclear whether the outer banks would become a recreation area, or an industrial or atomic wasteland.

By 1949, however, these alternatives lapsed, the park project revived, and the resort area along the northern banks had rebounded and continued to grow. The failure to create a park before the war resulted in significant local changes that propelled the Park Service to re-imagine what an as-yet undefined coastal seashore would be and how it should serve public interest. An economic logic was already apparent in the creation of national parks by the 1920s. It was quite clear to many that parks encouraged tourism and enhanced the taxable value of land in those areas in a way that extractable industry could not.⁸² That logic was built into the 1930s version of the park, and locals stood to gain financially from tourism. But that gain would be limited. The National Park Service argued in the late 1930s that roads in the Hatteras Park were incompatible with preserving “primitive wilderness,” and Park Service administrators sought to restrict roads to where they already existed.⁸³

⁸¹ “Progress Report—Project ‘Nutmeg’,” 7 October 1948, The David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, NC. Dean Bruno, a graduate student at North Carolina State University, pointed me to the Project Nutmeg report.

⁸² Louis Warren makes this point about the economic value of preserved nature in *The Hunter's Game*, 142-143.

⁸³ Though there was early support of road construction, most Park Service administrators opposed a road by the late 1930s. Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 57-58. The most concrete expression of Park Service policy regarding the proposed park, however, was an informational pamphlet entitled “Questions and Answers Concerning the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Project, North Carolina,” produced in 1941. The pamphlet gave an ambiguous answer on roads, explain that it was the purpose and the desire of the Park Service to maintain the area as a wilderness, but they did concede that “it is recognized that it may be necessary to construct roads, even in otherwise undeveloped areas, if the public need and safety requires them.” NC State Archive, Department of Conservation and Development, Activities of the Department, Parks 1936-1941, Cape Hatteras Seashore 1938-1941 folder.

When the park project recommenced, the state of North Carolina was initiating the construction in segments of what would become NC highway 12, traversing Hatteras Island and the Bodie Island peninsula south of Nags Head. Paving began in 1950. The road expressed a commitment by the Raleigh state government to increase the use and taxability of the state's coastal islands one way or another through accessibility and probable development. The national park seemed to have been a failed policy. During the summer of 1949, a headline in the Manteo paper, the *Coastland Times*, read "Seashore Park Dead Declares Banks People."⁸⁴ And many, even ardent supporters like Franks Stick and his son David, thought the park would never come to pass.⁸⁵ The road, as Frank Stick anticipated nearly two decades earlier, would raise property values exponentially, and land owners anticipated the extension of resorts southward. When in 1950 the Park Service again expressed interest and actively sought land donations to create the seashore park, Hatteras Island land owners, especially those with larger holdings, voiced loud opposition. Whereas the earlier park, which islanders equated with government funds and increased tourism, drew almost no opposition, the economic context of the early 1950s and the construction of a state road had reversed that tide. Besides resistance from the Dare County Board of Commissioners, anticipating increased tax revenue through development, leading opposition voices claimed to have petitions showing that 98% of Hatteras Islanders opposed the park.⁸⁶

As late as May 1952 it seemed to Park Service officials that the Cape Hatteras Park might never be realized. Time mattered; the enabling legislation Congress passed in 1937

⁸⁴ "Seashore Park Dead Declares Banks People," *Coastland Times*, Manteo, NC, 8 July 1949.

⁸⁵ Stick, "Cape Hatteras National Seashore," 35-38 ;Stick, interview with author.

⁸⁶ "Hearing in Raleigh Monday for Seashore Park Controversy," *Independent Star*, Elizabeth City, NC, 17 August 1952; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 72-75.

was viable for 15 years and would expire later that year. Between the Pea Island wildlife refuge, the earlier donations, transfers of state-owned-lands, and some new acquisitions, the Seashore Commission soon had the 10,000 necessary acres, but Park Service personnel refused to create the park under those circumstances. The park, as the Park Service envisioned it, would have to extend from Bodie Island southward to Ocracoke Island. To create the national seashore with the land then held would mean a national park in patches, speckled with sizable private holdings, and the Park Service would not own the beaches across the islands, which they argued was necessary for erosion control. Cost also increased daily. Quite literally, the Park Service was chasing the road; once pavement completely linked Hatteras with Nags Head (with a ferry serving Oregon Inlet), the cost of acquisition would become prohibitive.⁸⁷

Approval of the park was unexpected. It was only with a \$618,000 donation from the Mellon family, which the state of North Carolina then promised to match, that decided the fate of the islands in favor of a recreational park. With those funds the Park Service could establish the seashore park and condemn the beach property necessary to take over all of the land outside of the villages. Without consulting villagers or other landholders on Hatteras or Ocracoke Islands, Park Service Director Conrad Wirth, representatives from the Seashore Commission, and Governor-elect William B. Umstead met in Raleigh in late December of 1952 and shook hands to establish the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area.⁸⁸

Reaction was immediate and vigorous. Preston Basnett, probably the most active opponent,

⁸⁷ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 92-94; Stick, "Cape Hatteras National Seashore," 35-41. It should be noted that originally the enabling legislation allowed 10 years to create the park, and the extra five years later added to extend the legislation was already a concession.

⁸⁸ "Hatteras Park Land Transferred," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 23 December 1952; Stick, "Cape Hatteras National Seashore," 40-42; Stick, *Outer Banks*, 252.

after a year of local organizing and protest took the matter up with the President himself, asking Dwight Eisenhower, in the name of “The People of the Outer Banks of North Carolina,” to defend locals’ freedoms from “our aggressor’s [actions].”⁸⁹ When Park Service personnel received complaints from villagers, one response, probably typical, was matter-of-fact and mechanical: “I regret to learn . . . that you are not in favor of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore . . . Having reviewed the circumstances relating to this project . . . I feel that it is in the public interest for it to proceed as authorized and programmed.”⁹⁰

Many villagers resented the condemnation of their property in the “public interest,” yet much of the early resistance among Hatteras Islanders was more over questions of policy than acquisition. The villages would be excluded from the park, but it was not clear what the Park Service’s policy was on the newly constructed road, which villagers wanted and the Park Service had formerly opposed. Nor was it clear what a large government holding, supposed to be held permanently as “wilderness,” would mean for fishing and hunting around the islands, whether the Park Service would take tourist businesses such as lodging away from locals, or whether or not a park would mean continuing sand fixation and erosion control. As early as 1950, Conrad Wirth, the then Assistant Director of the Park Service who became Director the following year, supported the road building effort, calling a road across Hatteras Island “inevitable,” and he assured locals that the proposed park “will have no effect

⁸⁹ Preston Basnett to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 23 May 1953, National Archives, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, General Records, Administrative Files 1949-1971, Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke Island (Feb. 1, 1952-May 31, 1953) folder.

⁹⁰ This quote is from a specific letter found in the archive, though the language suggests that it typified Park Service responses to the numerous complaints received from locals. National Park Service Office, Assistant Secretary (unsigned copy) to Alonzo O. Burrus, 7 May 1953, National Archives, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, General Records, Administrative Files 1949-1971, Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke Island (Feb. 1, 1952-May 31, 1953) folder.

on sport or commercial fishing in the area” and that it would not encroach on tourist businesses. Sand fixation would continue as necessary to attain and maintain the land’s natural condition. But erosion control, not reforestation, was the new framework for dune maintenance.⁹¹

After the park’s creation, well-connected opponents launched a misinformation campaign that helped garner resistance among Hatteras Islanders.⁹² Following the park decision, director Wirth visited each of the settlements along Hatteras and held public hearings to inform locals what the park was and what it was not. On October 31st, Wirth published “A Letter to the People of the Outer Banks” in a local newspaper, which he ensured to be delivered to each home free of charge. The Wirth letter contained some compromises, primarily enlarging the room for expansion around villages and changing the park boundary in front of the villages from 1,000 to 400 feet, but the bulk of the letter provided detailed information on what the park would mean. Hunting areas were detailed. The 28,500-acre park extended not beyond 150 feet into sound waters, beyond which fisheries were subject to state and federal regulation. And, Wirth stated clearly, “the National Park Service proposes to resume the sand fixation work; to re-establish the natural plant and wildlife with the area; and to provide access to the beach for everybody (including haul-seine fishermen).” Villagers largely dropped their opposition, and they took the Wirth letter to be a contract against which they could defend their rights.⁹³

⁹¹ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 84-85. Includes quotes from Wirth.

⁹² *Ibid.* 80.

⁹³ Conrad Wirth, “A Letter to the People of the Outer Banks,” *Coastland Times*, Manteo, NC, 31 October 1952; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 115-118. That the letter became a “contract” was made clear when the Park Service reversed their commitment to erosion control. See Behn and Clark, *Termination II*.

The Cape Hatteras National Seashore represented the most recent manifestation of conservationists' desires for the outer banks. This first seashore park was a precedent for anticipated future parks, and it was intended to be all things to all people. Cape Hatteras would ensure the preservation of a long stretch of beautiful shores and salt marsh habitats; it would make that undeveloped space freely available to the general public for recreational purposes and ensure that Americans would have easy access by automobile; and by attracting tourists the park promised to turn unproductive nature to productive purposes for local residents, while also allowing for commercial fishing. This park was unique among Park Service holdings. Unlike previous lands administered by the National Park Service, the Cape Hatteras Park contained existing villages and a state-owned right-of-way running through federal land to connect those villages. Whereas parks elsewhere excluded all commercial activities, Cape Hatteras allowed for commercial fisheries, including access over the dunes for haul-seine fishing from the beach, and it also allowed for hunting over large areas of the sound shores. In defining what kind of access "the public" would have at Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the new park helped to redefine the type of management in which the Park Service engaged generally.⁹⁴

The road changed the nature of the seashore. Though earlier Park Service administrators had opposed such a road, continued opposition in 1950 would probably have prevented a park altogether. With a *de facto* ribbon of pavement cemented into the 1950s version of the seashore park, automobile access and continued shoreline dune construction drastically altered the scale of tourism, and that changed what the park would mean for locals

⁹⁴ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 188, 191, 197-200.

and how they would relate to the social space around them. Roads meant that extra-locals—strangers in these tight-knit fishing villages—would soon inundate the land and built up seasonal homes in the shoreline space protected by the artificial dunes. Neo-locals would bring outside dollars, but they would also bring foreign conceptions about uses of the land and the meaning of place that often opposed villagers’ traditional uses of those spaces.⁹⁵ In accepting the road, conservation ideas about uses of the outer banks had quite clearly transitioned from a producer to a post-industrial consumer economy.⁹⁶

Accepting the road and preserving the villages also locked the National Park Service into a particular relationship with the land. Deeds for banks property had typically indicated property boundaries by some landmarks on the sound side of the island, and property lines extended across the islands to end indefinitely at the edge of the shore.⁹⁷ By creating boundaries around the villages and accepting custodianship of the beaches, the Park Service obligated itself to respect those boundaries and to keep the shore from moving. Roads necessitated the continued maintenance of shoreline dunes outside of the villages. Whereas the New Deal project temporarily committed federal funds to stabilize the outer banks landscape, the Cape Hatteras Park, by defining the outer banks as essentially stable lands and

⁹⁵ For some wonderful and revealing accounts of the changed meaning of place for locals, see *Ethnohistorical Description*, 159-163, 198, 222, 244. This will also be a subject for discussion in the following chapter.

⁹⁶ The shift from production-oriented conservation to postwar, postindustrial environmentalism is the subject of Samuel Hays’ important work, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Adam Rome argues that the combination of the machinery of production and postwar consumerism that powered the massive tract housing suburban sprawl, resulting in great loss of natural space, most directly led Americans to embrace environmental concerns and supposedly natural areas in *Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). A road on the outer banks served the dual purpose of giving many Americans the experiences they desired in “natural” settings, while also promising to make that land productive for locals.

⁹⁷ This point demands further investigation, but two sources gave similar accounts of plot demarcation. *Ethnohistorical Description*, 292, and David Stick, interview by author, 16 April 2007. David Stick was involved with real estate on the northern banks and helped to survey land based on old deeds.

conceptualizing property relationships within that framework, obligated the Park Service indefinitely to attempt to make the islands fit that definition.

The entanglement of desires for the banks that the Cape Hatteras Park represented created a new place in an old geographical space. With Cape Hatteras, the Park Service not only established a unique holding among national parks; in a sense, they also created the Outer Banks. That label for the islands entered popular lexicons only in the early 1940s, and it became a standardized place name by the early 1950s.⁹⁸ The new name for the islands reflected a fundamental shift in thinking about the banks. The Outer Banks was a non-localized name. Rather than the “south banks” or “north banks” prevalent in the 1930s, the “Outer Banks” were non-direction; the viewer began from the mainland. But collectively calling all of the islands from the Virginia line to Cape Lookout the “Outer Banks,” no matter how ‘outer’ they were, reflected the even more distant view from a map. The term was descriptive, but it also abstracted the islands from place. For the scientists who initiated popular use of the term, the Outer Banks meant a certain subset of barrier islands with

⁹⁸ The term Outer Banks was not employed in newspaper accounts in the 1930s, using “lower banks” or “south banks” instead. The newspaper was based in Elizabeth City, and from that orientation, Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands were southward. David Stick explained to me that when he grew up in Manteo in the 1930s, people used to refer to going anywhere from Bodie Island south was “going down the banks.” William Engels, a zoologist who studied faunal distribution on certain islands during the 1940s and 1950s used the terms “outer banks” in his studies published in *The American Midland Naturalist* beginning in 1942 (see bibliography), which he offset by quotations to imply colloquial language and explained that it was a local title. The first use this author found of the capitalized title was a 1943 report by the director of the New Deal sand fixation project, A. C. Stratton, who wrote that this area was “known as the ‘Banks’,” which he qualified with quotations. Stratton freely uses the term Banks afterward without quotations, and uses the term Outer Banks, also set off by quotations, only in the report’s final sentence when referring to “the residents of the ‘Outer Banks’.” A.C. Stratton, “Reclaiming the North Carolina ‘Banks’,” *Shore and Beach*, (April 1943), 25-27, 32. By the 1950s, “the Outer Banks” was regularly employed to refer to a certain subset of the barrier island system forming the North Carolina coast, though the limits of this subset remained contested. Ben Dixon MacNeill pointed out in *The Hatterasman*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1958), 38, that Ocracoke and Hatteras Islands were the original “outer banks” and that the term had only recently been applied to all of the North Carolina barrier islands from Shackleford Banks north “to the great indignation of the native population.” Because the term did not appear in documents before the 1930s, it is unclear that it was used to describe even these two islands before the 1930s project.

ecological and geological attributes particular to barrier islands as a category. Those purchasing romantic experience at the Outer Banks etched new meaning onto that place name and, by reducing the islands to beautiful, non-productive spaces, also abstracted the land and remade it intellectually. For those coming to the park for recreation, the beauty of the land, the rote of the tide, the peace of a lighthouse bordered by sea oats could be carried with them to the shore, preceding their arrival, or afterward carried home.

The new Outer Banks created complicated and often strained relationships between locals and extra-locals, and the Park Service found itself often negotiating uses between recreation and preservation, real estate and landscape change, and access to fisheries among commercial fleets and sportsmen. By the 1970s, reactions in scientific circles against shoreline dunes and against presumptions of a stable natural system on the barrier islands mirrored local villagers' reactions against eroding cultural practices that Hatteras Islanders sought to preserve in oral histories conducted by residents.⁹⁹ Two decades after establishing the park, residents and developers alike were forced to come to terms with several ironies of the Outer Banks project: what was supposed to stabilize and restore the banks to a past equilibrium instead led to a transformed landscape that required constant maintenance; though conservation was supposed to be about scientific, rational management, it was instead political, inefficient, and out of step with later science; whereas locals were supposed to be primary beneficiaries of the New Deal conservation project, the final park pushed villagers to

⁹⁹ For new science and controversy over the implications for Park Service policy, see Behn and Clark, *Termination II*. The oral histories referred to is the local journal, *Sea Chest*, created tri-annually by the English students at the high school in Buxton beginning in 1973. *Sea Chest* personnel interviewed locals to both to learn about the islands past and, at least as often, capture the fading traditions of the island, including running sections dedicated to recording local dialects and many interviews with boat builders, net tiers, and those who engaged in traditional fisheries. The *Sea Chest* project ran until 1981.

the periphery; and conservation that was supposed to benefit “the people” created a space where nature, rather than people, was the central client.

But catering to nature on a post-industrial Outer Banks was a new way to make the land productive, through recreation rather than industry. The tensions present in the Spears-Throop debate—seeing the outer banks as romantic beauty or as productive land—persisted long after the park’s creation, but the terms of that argument had changed. Productive use of the land no longer meant livestock, trees, and forest resources; it meant preservation and tourism instead, and it relied on stable land and infrastructure. The competing visions of early twentieth-century thinkers became entangled in complicated ways that created new meanings for the islands, and for the people on the land. These were outsiders’, not locals’, perspectives. Preserved nature could be productive because roads made the banks more and more accessible, and larger geographies of outsiders converged at the coast, all seeking to recreate the banks in their own image, or as a space for their ideals. Following the park, many thousands of visitors arrived each year not only for the beaches of developed areas like Nags Head, but also for the natural space on Hatteras Island. They came to the national seashore seeking the pristine. Like Throop and Spears, they tended to find what they expected.

CHAPTER IV

An Entangled Banks:¹ Tourism, Management, and Meaning, 1953-1977

“Some day [Cape Hatteras] will be a great resort—but not in my day I hope.
Its very remoteness constitutes no small part of its present charm.”
—H. H. Brimley, 1905²

“Those who want to see a simpler, more rugged Hatteras they’ll never see
again, had best be going. Fast!”
—Bill Sharpe, 1952³

In 1937, as the National Park Service assistant director of land planning, Conrad Wirth wrote to advocate for the creation of a national park along the North Carolina banks. Wirth briefly echoed the concerns of his contemporaries, lamenting that locals had misused the land, and declared triumphantly that, under Park Service auspices, “The shoreline . . . will now be fixed, and sometime in the future heavy vegetation and trees will again cover the area, returning it to its original condition.” For the majority of his essay, however, rather than concentrating on restoration the assistant director extolled the natural beauty a visitor could expect of the shore. Wirth’s narrative followed along the barrier strip as though one were driving, north to south, entering by way of the Wright Memorial Bridge above Kitty Hawk. Arriving at what was called “Whalebone Station,” where the Virginia Dare Trail veered west to connect by bridge to Roanoke Island, Wirth maintained a southerly course. “Now you are at the point where the primitive begins,” wrote Wirth, “You drive off the road onto sand,

¹ This title is a play on the title of an excellent history of ecological science by Joel B. Hagen, *An Entangled Bank: The Origins of Ecosystem Ecology*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

² H.H. Brimley, *A North Carolina Naturalist: H. H. Brimley, Selections from His Writing*, ed. Eugene P. Odum, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 25.

³ Bill Sharpe, “Hatteras Highway,” *The State*, (July 12, 1952), 19.

stop, and let about half of the air out of your tires, because the rest of the driving will be over the almost trackless beach.” Taking his reader across Oregon Inlet by the ferry that had been running regularly since 1924, Wirth celebrated the adventure of handling a car “under these new and strange conditions.” The land that opened to the visitor was new and strange and wonderful. “For miles the beach and the surf stretch out before you,” creating a “wild and free atmosphere” of waves against the shore. Visitors could walk “on the beach in the moonlight,” contemplate the changeless sea, and enjoy sport in “probably the last region of virgin fishing ground on the Atlantic Coast.” Throughout the imagined travelogue, Wirth’s vacationers experienced the place alone. They faced a primitive nature, benign and rejuvenating. Wirth included two snapshots of villages, but they were views from outside, gazes from the car window. The Chicamacomico settlements and Avon were “extremely pleasing to look at,” Wirth assured; villages around the cape were “quaint fishing communities where life is simple and set to a calm pace.” The place seemed to be lost in time. Unlike developed shorelines elsewhere, Hatteras and Ocracoke were spaces, the assistant director claimed, that remained “in almost the primeval condition in which they were found by those who first touched their shores.”⁴

Were the National Park Service to take over the North Carolina barrier shores, their mandate, according to Wirth, would be “to keep as much of the area as possible in a primitive state.” In 1937, Wirth’s vision did not include roads. To experience driving “helter-skelter wherever you find the going best” was to know the peculiar primitiveness that Wirth

⁴ Conrad L. Wirth, “National Parks, Cape Hatteras Seashore,” *American Planning and Civic Annual*, ed. Harlean James, (Washington, DC: American Planning and Civic Association, 1937), 97-102; That the ferry service at Oregon Inlet had been running since 1924 is from David Stick, “Toby Tillett and His Ferry,” *The State*, (June 18, 1949), 5. Whalebone Station was later renamed “Whalebone Junction.”

valued of the banks as he found them. By the early 1950s, after the state had initiated road construction, in part because of the presence of protective shoreline dunes, the park could not have been created without paved lanes. In 1950, one year before he was to become the Park Service director, Wirth wrote that “a road to the communities south of Nags Head is inevitable.” Instead of simple resignation, however, Wirth supported the road. It would keep vehicles off the dunes and replanted lands, confining visitors to controlled areas. Access points through the dune line would also continue to permit driving along the beach. Because Wirth and the planners that preceded and followed him presumed the natural condition of the outer banks to be a stable landscape, the road was not inconsistent with preserving nature on the banks. In fact, the road represented a marriage of mandates for the Park Service’s first “National Seashore Recreational Area.” Pavement running down the middle of stabilized barrier islands would open the place up for the benefit of the travelling masses. Locals accommodating tourists in the villages set off from the park would benefit from outside dollars and easy access to the mainland. And, above all, by funneling traffic along a common course the roads would permit this type of use without compromising efforts to maintain the islands as natural space.⁵

As Americans increasingly sought out beach vacations in the postwar period, the North Carolina Highway Commission lost little time in building the infrastructure that would

⁵ Wirth, “National Parks,” 98, 102; Cameron Binkley, *The Creation and Establishment of Cape Hatteras National Seashore: The Great Depression Through Mission 66*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, 2007), 85, including the 1950 Wirth quote. The park was officially entitled the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in 1937, but a 1941 amendment to the original legislation added “Recreational Area” to the official park title and also explicitly guaranteed hunting rights absent from the earlier enabling bill. “Recreational Area” continued to be the official title, but the Park Service and all others gradually dropped the extra words, reducing the title unofficially to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The full title was afterward used only in formal documents.

ensure taxable development on coastal real estate along the Banks. Contractors finished the Hatteras Island road that helped to redefine the Cape Hatteras Park in 1952. The state had already taken over the Oregon Inlet ferry two years earlier, creating a toll-free extension across the water of what became NC highway 12. Traffic to Hatteras immediately became jammed at either side of Oregon Inlet with eager passengers impatient to travel back and forth along the islands. To provide better access, the Park Service helped the Highway Commission obtain Landing Craft Utilities used by the Navy in WWII—first one in 1953, then two more the following year—to act as ferries. In 1954, the Highway Commission began constructing a bridge crossing Croatan Sound to link Roanoke Island with the mainland. A road traversing Ocracoke began in 1955, and state-operated ferries between Hatteras and Ocracoke, and between Ocracoke and the mainland followed. Though established in 1953, the Cape Hatteras National Seashore was not officially dedicated until April 1958; by then nearly the entire transportation infrastructure of the Outer Banks was in place. The final link, lasting into the early 21st century, was to bridge Oregon Inlet. Named after the district Congressman at the time, Herbert C. Bonner, the state completed the Bonner Bridge in 1963. Hatteras Island afterward opened to virtually unlimited automobile traffic.⁶

With the creation of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, preservation of natural space under the Park Service continued to center on dune construction and management. At the same time, the dunes that managers used to “stabilize” the islands and save the beaches from erosion were also understood as structures to protect the road and island properties.

⁶ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 57-58, 132-136; Michael J. Dunn III, “40 Years of Ferries,” *The State*, (Feb. 15, 1965), 9-10; Robert B. MacPherson, “Cape Hatteras is Looking to a Record Influx,” *New York Times*, 9 June 1963.

This was what director Wirth promised locals in 1953 with his “Letter to the People of the Outer Banks,” that in order to “protect the communities from the intrusion of the ocean,” the Park Service would “resume the sand fixation work that it started in the 1930s and more firmly establish the dunes.”⁷ The New Deal project had largely completed the intended dune line along the barrier shore, though they made a half-hearted effort on Ocracoke Island due to political disagreements with Hyde County. But work along the entire shore was yet to be done. The dunes had incurred damage from storms in the meantime. Between 1936 and the early 1940s, the dune-building project was blessed with relatively calm weather. In 1944 two severe hurricanes ravaged the North Carolina Coast. Much of the artificial dune held strong, though several sections blew out, and around Avon ocean and sound waters met, causing widespread property damage. Between 1944 and 1953, the year of the Park’s establishment, the North Carolina coast again escaped each hurricane season unscathed. For the first couple of years after its founding, Cape Hatteras Park administrators largely concerned themselves with clearing titles to all of the lands destined to become park property, requiring seemingly endless litigations and delaying the park’s dedication. During that time, the Outer Banks faced the most frequent barrages of hurricanes in recorded history. Between 1953 and 1960, six major hurricanes slammed the North Carolina coast; four of those storms hit in one twelve-month period, from the fall of 1954 to 1955. People afterward began referring to the Atlantic lane into which the Outer Banks extended as “hurricane alley.” For park managers the damage and impermanence of the early dunes in the wake of these storms only showed that the dunes had not been given adequate time to support a proper natural vegetative cover.

⁷ Conrad Wirth, “A Letter to the People of the Outer Banks,” *Coastland Times*, Manteo, NC, 31 October 1952.

Nobody seemed to doubt the assumptions of the earlier restoration project that impenetrable shoreline dunes were natural.⁸

Dune management resumed under Wirth's national ten-year mobilization plan for the National Park System known as "Mission 66." By 1955, twice the number of people visited national parks nationwide than the parks had been designed to accommodate, and administrators anticipated growing numbers in the years to follow. In 1956 Wirth initiated what became a nearly \$800 million effort to reform the parks over ten years to meet that demand by building trails, visitor centers, administrative facilities, and conducting historical interpretation, among other revisions. The National Park System would be entirely renovated in time for the Park Service's 50-year anniversary in 1966.⁹ On the Outer Banks, Mission 66 meant constructing facilities for beach bathing and camping, creating interpretive trails, erecting buildings to serve Park Service personnel, and remaking and vegetating the shoreline dunes. The work, according to the Cape Hatteras Park's first superintendent Allyn Hanks, pivoted on "erosion control," as administrators categorized dune management in the early park period. In his outline of Mission 66 for Cape Hatteras, following the barrage of hurricanes in the 1953-'54 season, Hanks' assertions were more prescient than he knew:

The National Seashore is a part of the "Outer Banks" and a sensitive balance exists between the forces of nature seeking adjustment and the inclinations of the people to whom it belongs. Development for recreational purposes requires a building up of the land against the sea and a vegetative bonding of the shifting sand. This calls for the application of sound engineering principle in cooperation with nature on the grand scale.¹⁰

⁸ Jay Barnes, *North Carolina's Hurricane History*, revised and updated edition, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3, 75-77; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 123-130, 152-157, 166-168.

⁹ John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961

¹⁰ Allyn F. Hanks, "Mission 66 for Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area," no date but presumably 1955 or 1956, CAHA National Park Service Archive, Manteo, Backlog: Cat 5417, Box 6 of 10, folder 2.

From Hanks' pen, dune building sounded decidedly unnatural. Constructing dunes was a manner of engineering the barrier landscape in the interest of stability, what the superintendent called "the inclinations of the people to whom it belongs," to subvert the "forces of nature seeking adjustment." Yet, Hanks, it seems, and others certainly, saw no contradiction in asserting the natural stability of the land. The forces of wind and water acting against it were natural, but so was the ability of the land to keep those forces at bay. Otherwise, the islands themselves would erode to oblivion.

If previous utilitarian and even contemporary recreational uses seemed at odds with preserving nature, the answer under Mission 66 was to launch a mechanized attack. In 1956, the Park Service used bulldozers for the first time, and extensively thereafter, to quickly build lines of shoreline dunes. The lee of the dunes would be planted by hand, but on the mid-island flats mechanical planters introduced in 1959 could plant nursery-raised grasses over space ten times that of men with spades. By the early 1960s, helicopters regularly dusted the islands with seed and fertilizer. Congress approved \$100,000 annually for erosion control at the Cape Hatteras Park over the first several years of Mission 66, and raised that appropriation to \$500,000 in 1961. The Park Service never failed to spend it. Despite the apparent limitations of dune management as a permanent solution, made evident in two terrible storms in 1960 and 1962, administrators continued to plan as though permanence was possible, that once the dune line could be established, nature would take over. When asked in 1964 by a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee that oversaw the Park Service budget whether or not dune management would be a continual cost, Wirth responded, "Yes, I think it will for a number of years . . . all shorelines . . . are moving back, they are eroded and

overused . . . Until we get those things restored we are going to have trouble. When we once do that, the shore will start building out again.” The outlook for a final solution seemed positive. It was just around the corner. But it would take time. And more money. To create a permanent solution to shoreline erosion at Hatteras would take 10-12 years, Wirth claimed, and cost between \$5 and \$6 million.¹¹

Earlier conservationists and Park Service personnel into the early 1960s agreed that the Carolina banks were stable before Euro-American colonization and could be stabilized into the future through restoration of the shoreline dunes. The recent past was an aberration. Before the arrival of white people with their fire, axes, and livestock, the banks apparently existed in a sort of timeless stasis. By constructing dunes and transportation infrastructure, Park Service and State policy assumed, and promised, a stable, timeless future. The Banks were to be made as ahistorical as possible. Stability underscored everything the Park Service hoped to accomplish with their first national seashore. Dunes would maintain the land in a supposed natural state, protect the transportation infrastructure that would make the place accessible, and ensure that locals could use tourism as a new economic strategy. But the islands were only to be stabilized, not fixed into place. Their sandy forms could shift, but within the limitations needed for development projects.

The first real test of what stability would mean came 1962. During March 7th and 8th, a northeaster pummeled the coast, destroying major sections of the dune line and, most

¹¹ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 174-179; Robert D. Behn and Martha A. Clark, *Termination II: How the National Park Service Annulled its “Commitment” to a Beach Erosion Control Policy at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore*, (Durham, NC: Center for Policy Analysis, Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, Duke University, 1976), 24-26. Behn and Clark included a compilation chart of appropriations for erosion control and also reproduced highlights of the transcript from the House Appropriations Committee meetings with Wirth.

significantly, opening a 500-foot wide inlet two miles north of Buxton. What became known as the Ash Wednesday Storm of 1962 caused more damage than any other since the onset of coastal development. Policy over the “Buxton Inlet” became the subject of a major year-long debate between the citizens of Avon, to whom a nearby inlet would have been a boon, the three villages around the cape that had their transportation route severed, and the Park Service. The Park Service was not certain how to respond to new inlets. Fresh inlets not only severed the road but also diverted water from existing inlets, the distance from which the growing economies of Outer Banks communities depended. Inlets were natural, but disruptive. In the end, the Park Service decided in favor of re-establishing the pre-storm *status quo*. Using specially-appropriated funds totaling \$623,000, the US Army Corps of Engineers filled the inlet with hydraulic-fill sand and redoubled the dune line, allowing the State Highway Commission to reconstruct their road behind the dune.¹² Filling inlets proved much easier than had been earlier engineers’ efforts to create new inlets where they wanted them, and the act expressed an endorsement of the fundamental framework of stability on which the Outer Banks project had been founded. To the extent possible the shifting landmasses were to be frozen in time, in practice if never explicitly in policy, at the point at which the Park Service took over the lands of the North Carolina coast.

The “primitive” nature of the Banks that the National Park Service sought to preserve also stood outside of history. Some efforts had been aimed primarily at preserving threatened species, which was the purpose of the Pea Island Wildlife Refuge for migratory waterfowl on

¹² National Park Service, “Buxton Overwash,” January 1978, CAHA National Park Service Archive, Manteo, Hatteras Island File, Buxton Erosion/Overwash folder; Behn and Clark, *Termination II*, 7; Orrin Pilkey et al., *The North Carolina Shore and Its Barrier Islands: Restless Ribbons of Sand*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 31; The width of Buxton Inlet is from William S. Ellis, “Lonely Cape Hatteras Besieged by the Sea,” *National Geographic*, vol. 130, no. 3 (Sept. 1969), 406.

the northern end of Hatteras Island, but preservation only extended to the type of nature that visitors liked. On the other end of the spectrum, the Park Service, for approximately the first decade of administering the park, sought to eradicate mosquitoes by ditching wetlands.¹³ In essence, it was not “nature” so much that was being preserved, but a certain version of nature. It was a nature that appealed to urban and, increasingly, suburban visitors. When vacationers came to the Outer Banks, they sought the rejuvenating nature of an undeveloped seashore, the isolation of islands stretching out into the Atlantic, the idealized experience that Conrad Wirth described in his 1937 essay. Wirth was certainly neither the first nor the last to describe the Outer Banks as a primitive, romantic wonderland, but he captured well what the Park Service thought they were preserving with their initial investment and annual appropriations. It was not so much the natural landscape that mattered, but rather the experience in that space. With proper management, similar experiences could be preserved for generations of Americans seeking pristine beaches and superb fishing. By making the islands easily accessible and creating camping areas or letting entrepreneurs lodge guests, visitors could purchase that experience at a price. The Cape Hatteras Seashore commodified the nature of the Outer Banks just as developers around Kitty Hawk had commodified the meaning of the past, a past that included Wright brothers, doomed colonists, and pirates, but often nothing meaningful to the existing communities or to locals’ ideas of themselves.

¹³ David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 282; Joseph Decosimo et al., “Striking Inwards and Downwards: Wetlands, Biodiversity, and Perception in North Carolina’s Albemarle Region,” (Chapel Hill: Carolina Environmental Program, Albemarle Ecological Field Site Capstone Report, 2003), 54-57; Edward J. Kuenzler and Howard L. Marshall, *Effects of Mosquito Control Ditching on Estuarine Ecosystems*, (Raleigh: Water Resources Research Institute of the University of North Carolina, 1973), 7; *Final Draft Report: An Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages Adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Select Interpretive Themes*, submitted to: National Park Service, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, (La Jolla, CA: Impact Assessment, Inc, 2005), 342-343.

The Outer Banks became a place made and increasingly remade to suit the purposes of people living most of the year away from the shore. Every year following the creation of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, more and more non-locals descended on the Outer Banks, each making their own claims on the place. The large populations of outside visitors dwarfed that of local villages during the summer, quickly forming the foundation of the banks economy, and recreating the narratives that lent meaning to the Carolina shore. 264,000 visitors to the seashore in 1955 swelled to over 1 million by 1964, and visitation increased steadily to over 1,700,000 in 1973. Populations of permanent residents in the 8 villages of Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands remained steady at about 3,500 during this time, yet by the early 1970s the Outer Banks averaged hosting around 20,000 people daily during the summer tourist season, and that daily average increased to 100,000 by the mid-1980s. The annual flooding of tourists changed the economic, political and social dynamics of the Outer Banks. By 1960 a majority of banks residents made a living primarily through service or construction industries, and ten years later a full 70% of those living permanently along the North Carolina barriers earned their wages from tourism. Between 1960 and 1975, retail sales increased 500% to \$48 million. Oceanfront building on Hatteras Island took off only after the state completed the Bonner Bridge in 1963. Land value, and real estate tax on that property, subsequently spiraled upward, increasing 600% between 1967 and 1975.¹⁴ The transition to tourism was nothing short of revolutionary.

¹⁴ Statistics on visitor numbers to the seashore are from Cameron Binkley's compilation, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, Appendix G, 259; "Population and Economy, Dare County, North Carolina," (North Carolina Division of Community Planning, 1963), David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center, Manteo, 13, 30-39; Gary S. Dunbar, *Geographical History of the North Carolina Outer Banks*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 90; "Seashore Management Strategy: Cape Hatteras National Seashore, North Carolina," National Park Service, (Oct. 1978), CAHA National Park Service Archive, Manteo, found in the

The distant geographies from which visitors came and the postwar mass American culture also redefined the North Carolina shore as a particularly American space. If World War I helped to “Americanize” the South, the Second World War and its Cold War aftermath greatly strengthened those national ties. The appeal of historic “first” events, such as the Lost Colony and the Wright brothers’ experiments, became important markers in an imagined shared national narrative free of complications, one that laid the groundwork for the supposed inevitable culmination in what, following Henry Luce, many dubbed the “American Century.” The idea of pirates along the coast, particularly Blackbeard who remained for a series of months at Ocracoke, served to romanticize that past. And the national seashore itself became a prize that Americans could claim as one of the many benefits of citizenship to which they were entitled.¹⁵ By pilgrimaging to spaces on the Carolina coast deemed important in that national narrative or by spending a day of recreation in a space with limited apparent human constructions, Americans could remake and reaffirm their own ideas of themselves. Visitors may not have known precisely what they would find at the coast, but they knew what to expect.

main filing cabinets unfiled, 11-13. This document contains the data on average daily populations during the tourist season as well as the increased value of property and of retail sales to 1975; The figure of 100,000 daily visitors during the summer of 1985 is from Robert Dolan and Harry Lins, *The Outer Banks Of North Carolina*, US Geological Survey Professional Paper 1177-B, (Washington, DC: The United States Government Printing Office, 1986), 38.

¹⁵ The dominant popular narratives that lent meaning to the Outer Banks in the 1950s are captured well by Nike Anderson, “October Holliday on the Outer Banks,” *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. 108, no. 4, (Oct. 1955). Anderson repeats what had become the standard interpretations of the Carolina Banks, from Blackbeard to the Lost Colony and Wright Brothers to shipwreck mysteries to sand and surf, and also the quaintness of locals, which is discussed below; For the relative numbers of visitors from each state in the early 1960s, see “Population and Economy, Dare County, North Carolina,” cited above. While North Carolina and Virginia were most commonly the homes of visitors, large percentages came from New York and Pennsylvania, and visitors came from as far away as California and Texas, as well as every New England state; The idea of “Americanization” of the South is from George Tindall and is discussed in chapter II.

By the postwar period, most people who visited the Outer Banks not only shared an interpretive framework; a majority had already seen their destination and anticipated the experience they were purchasing. The proliferation of photographs adorning promotional literature gave tourists to destinations everywhere certain expectations for their journey. Travelers to national parks were, for the most part, no longer discovering unknown places but rather comparing photos to reality. Often they found the same angle from which a promotional photo had been taken and re-created the image with their own camera, frequently stepping into the frame to somehow legitimize their experiences.¹⁶ Visitors to the Outer Banks most often knew their destination, and their anticipated experience, through the constricted lens of Aycock Brown. Brown, affectionately dubbed “Mr. Outer Banks,” directed the Dare County Tourist Bureau for over three decades beginning in 1952. He was also a renowned photographer. Promotional literature of all sorts displayed Brown’s vision of the Outer Banks: countless shots of beaches bordered by sea oats, lighthouses towering over the shore, the strewn remnants of shipwrecks, and large fish held abreast by proud sporting fishermen. But his favorite subjects were bathing beauties. They seemed best to convey the spirit of the seashore. An article in 1976 quoted him, pointing at a photo of a young white woman with a seashell to her ear, saying “Now that’s what everybody can relate to on a beach—girls, seashells, sand. They immediately get the feel of the warm sun and the water. Makes them want to head for the Outer Banks!” Aycock worked tirelessly to promote the

¹⁶ The importance of the transition from discovery to a more banal experience in visiting distant places was emphasized in Jared Farmer’s book *Glen Canyon Dammed: Inventing Lake Powell and the Canyon Country*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); Emily Greenwald did a brief and interesting study of the tendency of visitors in National Parks to re-create the photos that appear in books and promotional literature in “On the History of Photography and Site/Sight Seeing at Yellowstone,” *Environmental History*, vol. 12, no. 3 (July 2003), 654-659.

North Carolina shore, and many attributed him with putting the Outer Banks on the map.¹⁷ His photos not only drew visitors but also created and reinforced the meaning of the place for those visitors. The bikini-clad beauty only epitomized what all of his photos sought to convey: the Outer Banks were a place one came to get away, a place not to labor but to play. The Outer Banks were natural and primitive and romantic and fun.

In commodifying the Outer Banks, vacationers and promoters also commodified locals as part of the scenery. Amid tales of piracy, shipwrecks, lost colonists and inventors, the small fishing villages themselves filled with weather-beaten, community-built houses surrounded by piles of fishing nets and small gardens—which reflected the historic poverty of the coastal communities—attracted outsiders for their “quaintness.” Part of the attraction of the Outer Banks was to see and to make the acquaintance of “true natives,” those local folk speaking some strange and forgotten dialect and inhabiting a place where, as Wirth put it, “life is simple and set to a calm pace.” Perhaps nothing was more emblematic of the construction of the quaint than visitors listening to the countless tales of some “old salt” who had lived a life struggling with the sea. As locals turned to service industries to make a living through tourism, they often adopted the roles that outsiders expected of them. Those lodging guests repeated an array of island legends, served local dishes, and shared local knowledge. Locals also participated in tourist attractions that conformed to popular notions of the North Carolina shore. Most prominent following the park’s creation was the annual “Pirates’

¹⁷ Vera A. Evans, “Charles Brantley Aycock Brown: Ad Man, Con Man, Photographer and Legend,” *Tar Heel: The Magazine of North Carolina*, vol. 6, no. 4 (July-August 1978), 9-10; David Stick, ed., *Aycock Brown’s Outer Banks*, (Norfolk, VA: Donning Company/Publishers Inc., 1976), 8-9; The nickname “Mr. Outer Banks” was referred to in a State Senate joint resolution in 1985 honoring the career of Aycock Brown. It is available online at <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Resolutions/PDF/1985-1986/Res1985-10.pdf>, visited 4/20/2008.

Jamboree” that Hatteras village hosted from 1956 to 1964 and which included participants from every Hatteras Island community. Celebrated in April to lengthen the tourist season, villagers held a large fish fry, created pirate costumes, and hosted a series of races to attract visitors southward from Nags Head and Kitty Hawk. The Pirates’ Jamboree was the first large-scale tourist event on Hatteras Island and did a great deal to draw visitors to the southern extents of the seashore.¹⁸

Many locals gradually embraced the Outer Banks project, including the road and the stabilization of the shore, as a new way to make their land productive, which allowed them to stay put. Stabilizing the barrier lands not only enabled a commercial relationship with the land through tourism; tourism itself served as an economic stability that locals had long desired. If still dependent on the seasonal ebb and flow of visiting masses, as long as the infrastructure remained in place the tourist season promised locals a dependable source of revenue that fishing or hunting never could. As the Coast Guard decommissioned most of their outposts on the Banks following World War II, that reliable income was quite welcome.¹⁹

If villagers anticipated postwar tourism, a majority also opposed the national park in the early 1950s for various reasons, many having to do with access for fishing and maintaining traditional uses of the land. Their fears were not entirely unfounded. Park

¹⁸ Most of these ideas concerning “quaintness” are borrowed from John R. Stilgoe’s excellent book *Alongshore*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 310-312. Stilgoe was writing about Cape Cod, though the attraction to quaint fishing villages in Massachusetts is strikingly similar to how visitors described the people and villages of the Outer Banks; A good example of the attraction to “quaint” Bankers is captured in an Anderson, “October Holliday on the Outer Banks,” 504; Hal K. Rothman made the point forcefully that in postindustrial tourist destinations locals and neo-locals play the roles that visitors expect, both reflecting and reinforcing those expectations, in *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism and the American West*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Daniel C. Couch, “The Pirates’ Jamboree,” *Island Breeze*, special edition, vol. 4.

¹⁹ Dunbar, *Historical Geography*, 88-90.

regulations changed the way in which locals could use the islands. Though fishermen were guaranteed beach access, they were forced to remove their temporary fish camps and net houses from lands that now belonged to the federal government. Where locals formerly fished entire days haul seining from the shore, leaving their catch in piles at the ocean's edge to be later gathered and taken to a fish house in one haul, multiple uses of the beach made this practice impossible to sustain. Locals resisted and complained of regulations that dictated where they could and could not go, but as the unproductive areas of the Outer Banks passed from a local to a national commons, the Park Service compelled villagers to restrict their uses of the land for the benefit of competing users.²⁰

As outsiders crowded the lands each summer, supporting the new economy of the Outer Banks, they also created a new political force through their numbers and their dollars. Beginning in the 1970s, for instance, when contests arose between commercial fishermen's rights to use haul seine nets from the shore and the desires of visitors to save that space for anglers, it was often the locals who lost. The two groups of fishermen fought over the Cape Hatteras Park's legal obligation written into the enabling legislation. The Act creating the seashore park read: "the legal residents of villages . . . shall have the right to earn a livelihood by fishing within the boundaries to be designated by the Secretary of the Interior, subject to such rules and regulations as the said Secretary may deem necessary in order to protect the area for recreational use." Each side saw their own interests defended by the same sentence, commercial fishermen emphasizing the first part of the clause and sportsmen pointing out the qualification. Over the decades following the Cape Hatteras Park's creation, the Park Service

²⁰ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 274-275; Alton Balance, *Ocracokers*, (Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1989), 166.

had often to deal with numerous other issues over access, habitat loss, and the rights of commercial enterprises of all sorts. Charged to preserve natural areas, create recreational opportunities, and ensure access and use for locals and visitors alike, Park Service personnel were forced repeatedly to mediate contests over land use between manifold desires for the Banks.²¹

Tourism and expansion within the villages also locally isolated longtime residents and fundamentally altered the way that locals related to one another and to the space around them. Especially after the completion of the Oregon Inlet bridge, developers began buying up Hatteras Island real estate and expanding rapidly toward the ocean. They also drained wetlands, bought on the cheap and transformed into profit. Locals were sensitive to the changing topography. They had memories playing and working in those places. Where the Park Service did not regulate landscape transformation, change came fast. Locals later frequently lamented the loss of wetlands or wooded spaces cleared for new and expanding housing filled with newcomers. The privatization of the spaces within villages and the influx

²¹ Rose McArthur et al., "Commercial and Sports Fishing: A Talk Given by Thomas Gray," *Sea Chest*, vol. 2, no. 2 (fall-winter 1974-1975), 4-7. Gray's discussion recorded here discussed the earliest major controversy of fishing on the Banks, a weekend ban on commercial fishing from the beach lasting from October 1 to April 1, and Gray outlined why commercial fishermen should defend their rights, including the guarantees in the Hatteras Park's enabling legislation guaranteeing fishermen the ability to continue to make a living commercially. Arguing over the same clause were sports fishermen, who pointed out their rights in the public hearings over the haul seine ban, "Meeting of the Task Force Appointed by the U.S. Department of Interior to Hear Problems of Regulating Fishing on Park Service Beaches," Manteo, NC, 17 March 1973, CAHA National Park Service Archive, Manteo, 18; The language of the legislation is from "An Act: To provide for the establishment of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in the State of North Carolina, and for other purposes," Public bill No. 311, 75th Congress, Chapter 687, 1st Session, H.R. 7022, copy from the National Archives, College Park, MD, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Branch of Forestry, Correspondence and Subject Files 1928-1959, Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area, Forestry General folder; Controversy over declining numbers of striped bass became a major issue in the late 1970s, leading to heated conflict between sports and commercial fishermen and resulting finally in 1985 with the closing of the ocean striped bass fishery to commercial fishermen. Haul seiners were also outlawed from "the Point" at the tip of Cape Hatteras in 1993 because, as the Park superintendent explained, "The seine netters are a visual irritation to anglers." These cases are described in *Ethnohistorical Description*, 360.

of outsiders into their tight-knit communities also catalyzed local reactions. Islanders complained that they no longer knew their neighbors. Villagers remained very close, coming together especially around churches and schools, but their sense of community slowly broke down as outsiders moved in and many village children left for opportunities elsewhere. Privatization was often foreign and isolating in these formerly communal spaces. In 1988 an Avon man named Manson Meekins illustrated the changed sensibility of land use within villages that he perceived by recalling an incident in which some friends sat along the sound-side shore where they decided on a favorable spot, as locals had done as long as he could remember. The new owner charged the villagers with trespassing and chased them off of the land. “She was absolutely right in what she owned legally,” Meekins explained, “but you see the change that’s come about? These people . . . never suspected that anybody in Avon would ever come to them and say, ‘Hey, You’re trespassing on my land.’”²² Even as the Cape Hatteras Park withdrew large areas of the islands from development, locals felt a profound sense of loss of the places they had known.

Beachfront development on barrier islands and offset village boundaries within the national seashore were both premised on the concept of natural stability that the Park Service’s dune policy attempted to perpetuate. In the mid- to late-1960s, that framework was increasingly challenged, and nowhere more so than around Buxton. It also grew increasingly costly. The stretch of shoreline around Cape Hatteras, from Buxton to the tip of the cape, had

²² Behn and Clark, *Termination II*, 16; Several interviewees lamented the loss of wetlands and forested areas in the face of development in *Ethnohistorical Description*, 107, 188, 270, 334, including well known marsh areas such as “Sticky Bottom” south of Hatteras village and “Up Trent,” north of Ocracoke village, which had nothing to do with the village of Trent (Frisco); Manson Meekins, interview by Amy Glass, Avon, North Carolina, 12 July 1988, National Park Service and UNC Southern Oral History Program, David Stick Library, CALO Oral History Project, Outer Banks History Center, 57-58. Meekins also discussed the transformation of wetlands in Avon, including the place where his house sat in 1988.

long been the most volatile part of the Outer Banks. When Congress placed the lighthouse there in 1870, the structure was 1,500 feet from the shore; by 1935, waves rolled in only 100 feet away and the lighthouse was taken out of service. That section of shoreline built out in the 1930s, and Park Service personnel attributed that expansion to dune building, as the best evidence of the earlier project's success. But by the early 1960s Park Service personnel noticed something disturbing. The shore continued to erode, not from a cataclysmic event, but rather gradually and persistently, despite the presence of shoreline dunes. Following the 1962 Ash Wednesday Storm, Congress authorized the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1966 to undertake the first federal "beach nourishment" project to replace the receding shore and thereby protect both the Park Service's lighthouse and a naval base that was built in Buxton during World War II. Beach nourishment was a recently developed technique of fighting shore loss by using hydraulic pumps to throw massive amounts of sand back onto the shorefront. Nourishment had already been used to recreate beaches in some privately owned areas. Farther south along the state's coast at Carolina Beach, the local government purchased all property below the high water mark, effectively marking where the fixed landscape began, and initiated a policy of nourishment as the shore regressed. Now the Park Service supported the same policy for the Cape Hatteras Seashore. To replace the Buxton beaches, the Army Corps pumped 312,000 cubic yards of sand from the sound onto the shore at the cost of slightly more than a dollar per cubic yard. Within a year, most of that sand had washed away.²³

²³ Pilkey et al., *North Carolina Shore*, 1-2; Karen Greene, *Beach Nourishment: A Review of the Biological and Physical Impacts*, ASMFC Habitat Management Series #7, (Washington, DC: Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, 2005), 1; Information about the Carolina Beach nourishment policy came from a document detailing debates over nourishment for Nags Head: David Stick, "Dare County Erosion Control Board, 1963-

The first beach nourishment project was exceedingly ephemeral because the sand used was too fine-grained to be maintained on a beach, but nobody thought of beach nourishment as a permanent solution to the problem of eroding shorelines. Nourished beaches, no matter the type of sand, erode faster than other beaches. Beach slope profiles project several dozen meters out into the water, and when a beach recedes that entire sloped surface recedes also. Nourished beaches only recreate the visible part of a beach, and thus the submerged beach slope becomes increasingly steeper, creating increased rates of loss. Yet, though nourishment ultimately could not last, the paradigm for shoreline management changed in the late 1960s. Whereas Conrad Wirth in 1964 had assumed final stabilizing measures that would result in an expanding beach face (for an estimated \$5-\$6 million), the Park Service director who succeeded him later that year, George Hartzog Jr., told the House Appropriations Subcommittee in 1968 that expenditures for erosion control would have to be made indefinitely. The ocean was rising and shorelines were regressing everywhere. Hartzog's argument was reduced to a simple presumption: if the federal government did not perpetuate shoreline stabilization, the islands would soon erode away entirely. Erosion would destroy federal possessions on the islands, estimated at a value of over \$28 million, and eventually the ocean would inundate North Carolina's rich estuaries and attack the mainland. The costs were worth it, because the cost of inaction would be devastating. In 1968 Hartzog asked for an increase in what had been an annual appropriation for erosion control of \$500,000 since 1961 to include funds for regular beach nourishment. Though this was denied, Congress granted emergency funds following a hurricane in 1970, after which an

1966," Unpublished, David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center, 7; Details on the decision and cost of nourishment are from Behn and Clark, *Termination II*, 26, 34.

additional \$500,000 went toward a second Buxton nourishment project. Meanwhile, Hartzog was upset because his regular appropriation for dune construction had been cut in 1969 and 1970, which he vehemently defended as necessary to save the seashore. When finally NC Congressman Nick Galifianakis, a supporter of the dune strategy, asked the Park Service in 1970 to submit a detailed report on the cost of proper shoreline stabilization, researchers concluded that proper nourishment would initially cost \$5 million and \$1.5 million annually thereafter, in addition to \$400,000 each year for dune maintenance. In 1972, Congress granted the Park Service a special \$4.3 million allocation to fight shoreline erosion, which they used for a third nourishment project at Buxton. That sum put the total for erosion control, including \$2.5 million spent during the New Deal project, in excess of \$20 million with no end in sight. Instead of relinquishing the shoreline stabilization policy for its cost and ultimate futility, however, proponents increasingly emphasized the engineers' successes and the perilous consequences of terminating the struggle with the sea.²⁴

Even as they came to depend on the infrastructure built around shoreline stability, many locals had long been skeptical of the practicality of the dune policy. Flood waters often came from the sound side, for one thing, but they also had greater respect for, and resignation to, the power of the ocean. In an article published in *National Geographic* in 1969, the author noted that many of the locals he talked to were “wary of man-made defenses” and doubted the ultimate outcome of shoreline stabilization. Five years earlier, during a public debate held

²⁴ Much of these details are taken from the excellent study on the end of the beach erosion control policy on Hatteras, Behn and Clark, *Termination II*, 24-36. It should be pointed out that a parallel cost projection study undertaken by the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1970 estimated the initial cost of shoreline stabilization for Cape Hatteras at \$50 million, with \$2.5 million annually for upkeep; Another informative document on the policy and results of nourishment at Buxton is from a document created in January of 1978 discussing alternative policies for the Park Service, cited above, “Buxton Overwash,” January 1978, 1-4.

by the Dare County Erosion Control Board, formed to create support for a permanent nourishment policy for the Nags Head area that was ultimately unsuccessful, one local woman wrote in her opinion that “when the sea advances man must retreat, and that any money spent for erosion control would be money thrown away.”²⁵ Scientists soon after began vindicating local observations.

In the early 1970s, new science refuted the paradigm of natural barrier island stability just as Congress seemed ready to fund increasingly ambitious projects. Studying population succession on the Cape Lookout National Seashore, a separate national park established in 1966 to preserve the more southerly Core Banks and Shackleford Banks as undeveloped recreational areas, ecologist Paul Godfrey developed what he called “overwash theory.” In his *Oceanic Overwash and Its Ecological Implications on the Outer Banks of North Carolina* published in 1970, Godfrey argued that overwash, which occurred either during storm surges or more gradually at high tide in low-lying areas, was necessary and beneficial for barrier islands. Barriers, wrote Godfrey, were not stable but inherently migratory sand-based landscapes that moved toward the mainland in response to sea level rise. Overwash functioned as “the means by which the ocean builds and moves the barrier islands, and this movement is essential for their continued survival.” What managers had called erosion for so long, a term that implied loss, was not erosion at all but rather displacement. Depositing beach sands into the sounds was not destructive, Godfrey argued, it was essential. Overwash sand built up new marshland on the sound side and widened the islands, allowing them to survive their landward march. Dunes, which prevented overwash, created sand-starved

²⁵ Ellis, “Cape Hatteras Besieged,” 405; Stick, “Dare County Erosion Control Board,” 8. The quote is recorded by David Stick, who was chairman of the Erosion Control Board.

conditions that led to sound-side shore regression. In 1972 a professor of geology at the University of Virginia named Robert Dolan, working with the Park Service at Cape Hatteras on the dynamics of beach erosion, published a study that reinforced and expanded Godfrey's work. Dolan argued that the premise of stabilizing the ocean shore with dunes was all wrong. Dunes, he wrote, were "a response element of that (the beach) system, not a forcing element." Storm surges flowed around natural scattered dune fields and quickly dissipated their energy over the island surface. Dolan's work showed that as waves encountered impenetrable shoreline structures, even soft structures like dunes, the wave energy deflected downward and, rather than protecting the shore, actually increased the erosion rate of beaches. As sea level rose the pressure would increase on beach faces, resulting in ever-expanding rates of shoreline loss. Together, Dolan and Godfrey's work turned the science of barrier island management on its head; whereas the Park Service earlier argued that a shoreline dune wall was necessary to prevent island erosion, the new findings showed that it was the dunes themselves that threatened to destroy the islands.²⁶

Dolan and Godfrey did much more to affect policy change at Cape Hatteras than conduct important studies; they teamed up and became activists. Dolan, sometimes with Godfrey, published a series of scientific papers for the Park Service in 1972 assessing all aspects of erosion control, from dune stabilization to nourishment, and the pair of scientists gave multiple lectures and slide show presentations that year to Park Service personnel. The problem, they explained, was the very mindset of how the managers sought to deal with the

²⁶ Paul J. Godfrey, *Oceanic Overwash and Its Ecological Implications on the Outer Banks of North Carolina*, (Washington, DC: Office of Natural Science Studies, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1970), 1-2, 33-41; Robert Dolan, "Barrier Dune System Along the Outer Banks of North Carolina: A Reappraisal," *Science*, New Series, vol. 176, no. 4032 (April 21, 1972), 286-288.

shore. “[M]an,” wrote Dolan, “has attempted to draw a line and prevent the sea from passing.” Rather than continue to try to fight the sea and stabilize the shore, Dolan and Godfrey emphasized the idea of “dynamic stability,” that maintaining a stable barrier island regime required a long-term view. This had clear implications for human uses of the land. According to Dolan, “Survival of the natural beach environment along coastal North Carolina requires a strategy of submission and rapid rebuilding.” By the end of the year they had convinced the Park Service that their erosion control policy was not only bad, it was detrimental. The company hired to conduct the third nourishment project beginning the following year was told before the job began that they would be paid and then nourishment efforts would cease. The dune policy alongshore would have to be revised. Charged with maintaining natural space, the Park Service decided that the artificial dunes could no longer be supported.²⁷

The structure of Hatteras Island as it was in 1972 made that revision problematic. If the National Park Service abandoned stabilization outright they risked vigorous reaction, as administrators soon discovered. Policymakers had to tread lightly. In November of 1974 the Park Service issued a public statement of their intention to revise their policy in favor of dynamism rather than stabilization, and they held public hearings in several villages to debate alternatives. Included were five potential policies, ranging from a “do nothing” policy to

²⁷ Robert Dolan and Paul Godfrey, “Dune Stabilization and Beach Erosion, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, North Carolina,” Dune Stabilization Study, Natural Resource Report 5, (Washington, DC: US Department of Interior, National Park Service, Office of Natural Science, 1972); Robert Dolan, “Beach Erosion and Beach Nourishment, Cape Hatteras, North Carolina,” Dune Stabilization Study, Natural Resource Report 4, (Washington, DC: US Department of Interior, National Park Service, Office of Natural Science, 1972); The Dolan Quotes are from Robert Dolan, “Man’s Impact on the Outer Banks of North Carolina,” Dune Stabilization Study, Natural Resource Report 3, (Washington, DC: US Department of Interior, National Park Service, Office of Natural Science, 1972), 15; Behn and Clark, *Termination II*, 41-45, 51-54; Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 203.

constructing sea walls and planning for urbanized development. Most of the “options” were probably throw-aways; the Park Service had already decided beforehand on option two, which was to “Develop an ongoing resource management program, revegetate major overwash areas following destructive storms, and investigate alternative transportation.” But most attendees preferred the third option, to “Continue present shore erosion control practices.” “In general,” a follow-up report concluded, “the people commenting on the assessment displayed a deep feeling for the Cape Hatteras area and wanted to see it preserved ‘just the way it is.’”²⁸ Public voices, however, often expressed this desire for the *status quo* with outrage, many citing the 1952 Conrad Wirth letter ensuring continued dune maintenance. Thomas Gray of Buxton probably expressed the general feeling of locals who had gone into the real estate business most succinctly:

“For decades and decades we survived out here by building well back from the ocean. We know about the sea. But then Uncle Sam barged in and said it was okay to build tourist facilities next to the water’s edge, that federal money would keep the beach in place. Well, the waves have already taken some motels on the north corner of Buxton, and the Government now refuses to replace the dunes.”²⁹

Though locals had often complained of changes brought about by development and the restrictions of the national park that surrounded and increasingly regulated their lives, they also participated in the new postindustrial economy and expected federal and state investments to continue. Every new manipulation of the land that served to expand tourism

²⁸ The alternative policies were included in a document summarizing the public hearings and drawing conclusions, from which the quotes were also taken, “Environmental Review: Barrier Island Environmental Management Policy Cape Hatteras National Seashore,” March 1975, CAHA National Park Service Archive, Manteo, Cape Hatteras NS Environmental Assessment/ Shoreline Erosion Control Policy Statement file, Main filing cabinet.

²⁹ Thomas Gray is quoted in B. Drummand Ayers Jr., “Cape Hatteras Dunes and Fishing Rights Disputed,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1975; For another good example of local reactions, see the interview with Dare County Commissioner Bill Dillon before the new policy became public, “Erosion,” *Sea Chest*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1973), 5-15. Dillon, among many others, appealed to Wirth’s “Letter to the People of the Outer Banks” as a legal commitment by the Park Service that obligated them to continue dune maintenance.

was afterward seen as an entitlement. If the Banks were to be stabilized for house construction to expand near the shore, if a road was to traverse the islands, any change to these new promises would be actively resisted. The year following the hearings, Park Service administrators concluded that their management strategy would necessarily have to “address the entire natural and *social* environment of the seashore.”³⁰ The reconciliation of desires for infrastructure and fixed real estate on an inherently unstable landmass became the central problematic of the Outer Banks.

The road traversing the islands formed the backbone of the modern relationship that people came to have with the Outer Banks. Highway 12 ran as a ribbon of blacktop down the islands to quickly carry bodies back and forth, giving locals the access to hospitals, schools, outside employment, and abundant commodities that they long desired. And the road brought extra-locals *en masse* transposing their own desires but also carrying outside dollars that created new ways to make the banks productive. When the Park Service sought to change their erosion control policy, few challenged the logic of keeping the road. Even Dolan, whose urgings seemed to suggest radical reexaminations of land use, argued in 1972 that due to the rate of island development, “the highway . . . must be maintained,” though he thought it should be relocated as the ocean encroached.³¹ Following the public hearings, Park Service personnel concluded that considerations needed to extend beyond the road to what they called the “social environment.” The Park Service was “directed to preserve the Cape Hatteras barrier islands in a natural state for the use and enjoyment of both present and future

³⁰ Emphasis added. “Proposed Barrier Island Environmental Management Policy for Cape Hatteras National Seashore,” 1975?, CAHA National Park Service Archive, Manteo, Cape Hatteras NS Environmental Assessment/ Shoreline Erosion Control Policy Statement file, Main filing cabinet.

³¹ Dolan, “Dune Stabilization and Beach Erosion,” last page (unpaginated).

generations,” a proposed management policy statement read, but providing for recreation entailed two caveats. First, the Park Service was obligated “to assure a transportation link with the mainland is maintained.” Going further, they stated that “some landscape manipulation may be necessary in areas where the natural state of the environment may be incompatible with existing levels of human development,” which would be determined by weighing the environmental costs and social benefits. This vague language typified the Park Service’s approach to terminating dune management at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. In fact, no firm policy statement was ever issued. Instead, after Congressional hearings and widespread coverage in major media outlets, the Park Service used an informal document entitled *Environmental Assessment: Cape Hatteras Shoreline Erosion Policy Statement*, which only evaluated different approaches without suggesting one of them over others, to define a new policy that was never clearly stated.³²

After 1973, the National Park Service no longer spent money to control erosion on the Outer Banks, but dune maintenance did not ultimately cease. In 1977 the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), successor to the Highway Commission, agreed to take over sole responsibility for dune stabilization on the shoulder of the road near the volatile Buxton area. Eventually, the NCDOT took over responsibility for dune maintenance anywhere that overwash threatened their road, which extended to village shorelines. The “reversal” of Park Service policy was in reality a compromise. Rather than letting the beach revert to former dynamics, the Park Service transferred responsibility to another government

³² “Proposed Barrier Island Environmental Management Policy,” CAHA National Park Service Archive, cited above, 1-2; Use of the “Environmental Assessment” document to define the dune policy is discussed in Behn and Clark, *Termination II*, 85-91.

body. Each year one could see state workers walking along towering dunes to plant grasses and install new sand fences, perpetuating the projects of the 1930s in order to protect private property and access to it on the Outer Banks. Yet, the new policy did call, in a limited way, for a more reactive relationship. Along the most dynamic stretches of the Banks, the NCDOT did not construct dunes merely to keep the sea at bay, though stabilization remained their purpose. As portions of NC 12 washed away in cataclysmic storms, the state rebuilt the dune line and the road, but farther back, incrementally moving with the shoreline. In 1998, the Park Service decided in favor of moving the famed Cape Hatteras Lighthouse back from its threatened perch at the edge of the sea.³³ The successful move the following year demonstrated the policy of limited retreat.³⁴

When the Park Service decided to terminate the Cape Hatteras dune policy, the relationship with the land that had been created by the coastal tourist complex proved too embedded to allow for radical change. The massive economic investment in the Outer Banks project, especially after completion of the Bonner Bridge in 1963, ensured reactionary responses to any alternatives. But that reaction could not be reduced to simple economics. A majority of people, mostly visitors, wanted to see the Banks preserved “just the way it is” because they came to love the place as they found it. For multitudes it was not their money that risked washing away. Theirs was, rather, a cultural investment. Turning the Carolina banks into the “Outer Banks” in the postwar era, developing new and shared narratives about the islands, their nature, and their past, was to endow the place with deep cultural meaning.

³³ Binkley, *Establishment of Cape Hatteras*, 203; “Buxton Overwash,” January 1978, 3; Susan Hart Vincent, *Cape Hatteras Light Station, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Cultural Landscape Report*, (Atlanta, GA: National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, Cultural Resources Division, 2003), 32.

³⁴ Orrin Pilkey makes this point, hypothetically, in 1998 in *North Carolina Shore*, 8.

Vacationers came to the shore to experience relatively natural space and to have a good time, and the place met their expectations. People returned again and again. The Outer Banks became a meaningful part of their lives. A culturally rich landmark, the Outer Banks were valuable because hundreds of thousands of people had created good memories there.

Many environmentalists, led by geologists working on the North Carolina coast, especially Orrin Pilkey of Duke University and Stanley Riggs at East Carolina University, continued in the decades following the Park Service's decision to argue for a less "sedentary" approach to living with the Outer Banks and for a "nomadic" strategy of land use. Static structures should either be moved in the face of shoreline regression, they argued, or not rebuilt after they collapse. Relocating dunes in reaction to catastrophe was not enough. Because dunes prevented overwash and increased beach erosion, the islands were "thinning in place," losing sand from both sides. Riggs predicted that if the current approach continued, sea level rise would produce a complete collapse of large sections of the barrier chain by the mid- to late-21st century, beginning with the thin and volatile stretches that were less than a quarter mile wide. Only those on the radical fringe of environmentalism advocated abandoning settlements on the barriers entirely, but to many the idea of "nomadic" property or resignation to shoreline retreat and property abandonment seemed just as radical.³⁵

³⁵ Pilkey, *North Carolina Shore*, 8-10, 96-101; Stanley R. Riggs and Dorothea V. Ames, *Drowning the North Carolina Coast: Sea-Level Rise and Estuarine Dynamics*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Sea Grant, 2003), 62-67; Many environmentalists see the history of the Outer Banks as a narrative of increasing decline and argue for a "bio-centric" approach to managing the land, even as the justifications for those uses often appeal to human recreation and aesthetic enjoyment. That basic narrative is expressed well by John E. Wierwille in "Remaking and Restoring the Landscape of Dare County, North Carolina," in *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes*, ed. A. Dwight Baldwin, Judith De Luce and Carl Pletsch, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 168-179.

By the late 1970s the Park Service had effectively opted out of the debate. They would allow for natural processes only where they had clear, independent jurisdiction. The state had the right to protect its property, they argued, even if that meant in some cases engineering the landscape to the detriment of what the Park Service was trying to preserve. Influenced by the debates on the Outer Banks and elsewhere, the North Carolina government did pass legislation that many environmentalists and conservationists endorsed, considered by many among the most progressive state-wide policies for coastal management at the time. Most important was the 1974 Coastal Area Management Act, which prevented building in the most ecologically sensitive coastal areas and also outlawed hard shoreline structures, such as sea walls and groins, that upset beach dynamics or destroyed beaches entirely. Rather than allowing permanent structures to keep back the sea at the expense of beaches, as municipalities in many states had done, North Carolina endorsed a state-wide program of dune construction and beach nourishment. Faced with the option of either protecting property or protecting beaches, the state decided, at great public cost, that they would do both. People like Pilkey and Riggs argued that nourishment, though very expensive, was a better solution than many options. But nourishment was ultimately unsustainable.³⁶

Those who helped to construct the Outer Banks created a place that they did not anticipate. The dynamic set in motion by people like Frank Stick and numerous landscape managers repeatedly outpaced their intentions. The rapidity of change on the Outer Banks

³⁶ Pilkey, *North Carolina Shore*, 96-101, 206-210; The story of the development and purpose of the Coastal Area Management Act is detailed in David Stick, "CAMA: The Coastal Area Management Act of 1974, 1972-1974," Unpublished, David Stick Library, Outer Banks History Center; For a document showing that dune maintenance and nourishment remained the state policy into the 21st century, Dare County's "Land Use Plan" issued in 2003 is available online, <http://www.co.dare.nc.us/Forms/Luse/LUSEplan.pdf>, accessed 24 April 2008.

was commonly lamented by vacationers who deemed unfortunate the increased development of the place as they discovered it, but that development was felt most intensely by those who continued to call to the islands home. Most locals resented the type of unlimited development and the breakdown of the communities that transformed their villages. The tourist economy helped to provide a degree of economic stability, but that stability came at the price of cultural erosion. The new Banks economy provided islanders' children with opportunities for education and relocation that earlier generations did not have. As many younger people left the islands, new residents moved in. By the 1980s, villagers lamented that they no longer knew their neighbors, that their community members no longer "visit" the way they used to. Church and village stores continued to serve as central institutions, though with a largely aging base of longtime residents. As tax values on real estate increased in the villages, locals complained that their grandchildren would probably be unable to continue living on the Banks whether they wanted to or not. They feared that their cultural traditions would die with the elderly.³⁷ In leaving the villages outside of the Cape Hatteras Park boundaries, the Park Service intended to provide locals with a viable economic base, but the visitors who descended on the park ended by re-creating those spaces in their own image, at the expense of local traditions.

Villagers reacted in many different ways to the increasing dissolution of their culture. One way was simply to continue to fish commercially for a living. Converting one's business to charter fishing and catered to tourists was much more profitable and certain, but many local men, all of them in small-scale personal operations, continued to travel out into the

³⁷ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 76, 114, 159-160, 221, 344-345.

open sea and set nets for a living as a way to remain independent. Local gatherings and celebrations remained important ways to congeal island communities. The annual Old Christmas gatherings persisted as the most prominent island-wide event, and it remained a way for locals, especially in the Chicamacomico settlements, to resist cultural homogeneity. Hatteras Island high school students, organized by their teachers, also sought to preserve their culture in print by regularly interviewing villagers and collecting local information for a bi-annual journal called *Sea Chest* beginning in 1973. School instructors created the *Sea Chest* project primarily to record the villagers' history and folk culture before it was lost and forgotten. The journal featured interviews with older islanders who shared knowledge of, among many other traditions, curing yaupon tea, tying nets, smoking fish, quilting, carving duck decoys, and building boats. The journal recorded "Outer Banks dialect," folk medical remedies, recipes, superstitions, and stories. Most of all, *Sea Chest* was a forum for locals to define themselves, to challenge the commodification of the island's lands and cultures. In the first issue, students forwarded the journal with a section entitled "Tourists—Sorry! But It Had to be Said," in which the writers expressed both their welcoming of vacationers and their complaints of outsiders arriving with a sense of entitlement. Students were especially concerned with conflicts over ocean shore fisheries and lamented that tourists sometimes disrespected and even sabotaged the commercial fishermen's nets and catches. Many also expressed uneasiness with popular notions of island culture. As one student put it, "What irks me most is when tourists ask you, 'Are you a native?' When you say 'yes' they look at you as if to say, 'Wow, how often do they let you out of your cage?' or 'Where is the bone that

goes through your nose?’”³⁸ *Sea Chest*, created by the generation that had grown up with the park, was a way for locals to assert their own ideas of what it meant to be a “native.”

Many locals resisted the Cape Hatteras Park’s creation and, after its establishment, at times fought bitterly to preserve both their rights of access and the infrastructure on which they came to depend. Many lamented their disappearing heritage. But islanders typically tempered and even balanced those resentments with a recognition of how much they had gained: easy transportation, economic growth, public services, access to hospitals, abundant and diverse foods, and children in college. Repeatedly, villagers used the same word to describe the changes they had seen: “progress.”³⁹ Progress is a term connoting profound resignation. Supposedly good, progress is also apparently inevitable. As dominant national narratives helped to remake the meaning of the Outer Banks on terms that appealed to a larger public, over time that narrative of ingenuity and inevitability became increasingly internalized by villagers along the Outer Banks. Locals were able to participate in a national consumer economy and to read and listen to nationally broadcast media. “Progress” expressed a strong ambivalence. The word contained both the gains and sacrifices that locals

³⁸ *Ethnohistorical Description*, 50-52, 106, 260-264, 353-356; That commercial fishing was a continued form of resistance is also clear in an interview with a Buxton commercial fisherman, Dale Farrow, interview by author, Buxton, NC, 15 April 2007; The different subjects mentioned above can be found over many issues of the *Sea Chest* journal, and lists of dialect, recipes, and stories or superstitions appeared in nearly every issue, especially the earlier volumes. Quotes are from the first issue, *Sea Chest*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1973), 3-5. The first issue included articles on superstitions, local dialect, carving decoys, folk remedies, curing yaupon, and smoking fish.

³⁹ Some examples of locals attributing the changes they witnessed to abstract “progress” are included in *Ethnohistorical Description*, 114, 159-160. When I interviewed Dale Farrow in April 2007 and asked him the cause of the changes he had seen, some of which caused clear resentments, he responded similarly: “You know, it’s just progress. And eventually everywhere else grew to the point where people would come here.” Dale Farrow, interview with author, cited above.

encountered as they integrated themselves into new imagined communities, one a local and more inclusive “Outer Banker” culture, the other an American self.⁴⁰

By the last quarter of the 20th century, the Outer Banks had become a cultural landscape that existed in tension. The desires that Conrad Wirth described in 1937—to preserve a rejuvenating and benign wild space and to make that space available to thousands of Americans with automobiles—presumed a landscape fixed in place and unchanging over time. But the seashore proved to be a place that could satisfy only short-term, not long-term, expectations. Wind and water physically remade the land, and the varying desires of vacationers, boosters, scientists, managers, and locals converged and interacted to make and remake the islands intellectually. If the Cape Hatteras Park, created by legislation the year of Wirth’s speech, sought to preserve nature by protecting the shore and to preserve island heritage by excluding the villages from the seashore park, the relationship entered into, centering on a paved road and shoreline stabilization, became by the late 20th century the central threat to the survival of both. When the state of North Carolina could not relinquish the engineering of the seashore, it was an admission that the entanglement of desires that had constructed Outer Banks, as locals noted with their resignation to “progress,” had come to seem as inevitable and irresistible as the climatic forces that promised to destroy that place.

Living with the Outer Banks was connected to the broader threats of climate change, and the two shared a commonality often overlooked. Neither the outer banks nor the earth was truly threatened by rising oceans; each will persist, in altered form, long after humans are gone. The primary risks were mostly to human constructions. Sea level rise was largely a

⁴⁰ The idea of imagined communities is borrowed from the widely read book by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, (New York: Verso, 1991).

human story that risked human tragedy. What was threatened was a certain way of living with particular places.⁴¹ Like New Orleans or Manhattan, it was the destruction of a cultural space, one thick with human memories and experiences, that was threatened by the rising ocean at the edge of the Outer Banks.

⁴¹ Ari Kelman makes a similar argument about New Orleans in *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Creating the Outer Banks was to enter a relationship with the land based on the goals of both modernistic conservation and speculative interests marketing the amenities of oceanfront property. We can easily picture the image that park promoters and developers sold to the public: the sun floats just above the horizon, relaxing into an orange sky; a lighthouse stands like a sentinel semi-shadowed in the background; the foreground is broken by a row of sea oats waving above a seemingly endless stretch of pristine beach; and no people. Or perhaps a young couple laughs in the shallow surf, stretches into a hammock, or strolls along the shoreline still clad in wedding clothes. They are invariably young and attractive. And the viewers are to project themselves as that couple, to imagine an ideal experience that can be had at a price, one often quite different from the reality of screaming children, exhausting car trips, brutal sunburns, or a four-day storm that could not have been predicted when booking a room three months in advance to beat the rush. The Dare County Bureau of Tourism, making a play on the Wright Brothers theme, recently adopted the slogan that the Outer Banks are a place “Where dreams still take flight.”¹ The coastal zone was, indeed, a space conducive to American dreams. The popular stories of the North Carolina coast—the first flight, the first English colonists, the first national seashore—both made and reinforced the dominant narrative of American ingenuity and inevitability. The seashore existed as a prize that Americans could claim as an entitlement and an amenity of citizenship. At the same time, the nature that Americans sought by coming to the Outer Banks seemed to exist outside of

¹ The slogan was taken from the Dare County Tourist Bureau’s website, www.outerbanks.org, visited 23 Oct 2007. In April of 2008, that slogan had been removed, and a google search brought up only a float carrying the slogan used in a Wright Brothers parade.

history. The endless shore and the rhythmic surf seemed to create a space with no memory. Busy Americans liked that. A few days without a past, without responsibilities, was what the modern vacation was all about. And as coastal experience the Outer Banks delivered; many came to love the Outer Banks as they found it, and most visitors each year were return guests, creating new pleasant memories while also disparaging the growth that had altered the quaintness they admired.

To many Americans that description and those desires are quite familiar. Yet on the Outer Banks and other tourist spaces, desires for idealized experience came at more than one kind of price. They had social, economic, and ecological consequences. Not all of those consequences were negative, but many worked counter to actors' intentions. The Cape Hatteras Park, which turned the space of the first national seashore into a national commons, favored certain uses over others. Recreational fishermen had the numbers, resources, and time and organization to lobby for their interests that commercial fishermen could not match. Speculative developers radically transformed the physical and social space within villages. The Outer Banks increasingly became a place conducive to the imagined ideals of those seeking recreational paradise at the expense of locals' preferred uses of the land, even as visitors made the land profitable in new ways. The desires for natural space on the Outer Banks transformed over the twentieth century into an economic relationship that made large sums of money for some, but which was maintained at great and ongoing public expense. Continuing to live with the Outer Banks in the same manner into the 21st century also meant continuing a problematic marriage of consumerism and natural space, of dynamism with stabilized shores in front of static structures, and of a continual re-creation of nature as dunes

were built, grasses planted, and new beaches pumped alongshore. The degree of manipulation, management, and marketing of the landscape to service manifold desires for natural space was such that, by the late 20th century, lines could not easily be drawn on the Outer Banks separating nature and artifice.²

Understanding the place that Americans created at the North Carolina shore, and drawing any lessons from that history, requires coming to terms with the Outer Banks as they are. It requires understanding the legitimate social purposes behind various attempts to alter the land and apportion its productivity. It means accepting the discomfiting lack of simple solutions as those purposes have grown into a morass of entangled constructions, uses, and claims. Over the course of the twentieth century, and previously in limited ways, different groups of people attempted to alter the landscape to conform to a singular vision of what the place should be. The Outer Banks, by their very nature, refused to be so easily reduced.

Finding a usable past for the Outer Banks may mean radically altering our narratives. It may require telling broader, more complicated, and less linear stories about living with the coast. In his widely-read naturalist guide to the Outer Banks, Dirk Frankenberg, a marine ecologist and conservationist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, proposed what is probably the standard narrative for the Banks among conservationists:

Natural scientists divide [Outer Banks history] into three phases: a subsistence phase, during which development was controlled by the local resource base and by characteristics of the natural environment; a transitional phase, during which the subsistence economy was supplemented by nonlocal resources and humans began to modify, if not understand, characteristics of the natural environment; and a modern phase, during which humans have become largely dependent on nonlocal resources

² Though I was not thinking of it at the time of writing, this closing sentence is so close to the Richard White's thesis about remaking the Columbia River in *The Organic Machine* that I feel compelled to reference him. Actually, the work on my mind was Jennifer Price's chapters on the commercialization of nature in *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

but with development modifications increasingly based on an understanding of the natural environment.³

For Frankenberg, the first phase was the colonial era to the American Civil War, followed by the period covering the Civil War to the 1950s, and the final era came after the creation of the Cape Hatteras Seashore Park.

The economic framework of this periodization is surely sensible. It evolves from subsistence, or limited commercial, to industrial to postindustrial economic relationships. Yet the assumptions about culture and knowledge in such a schema are dense with bias. The progression is quite evidently teleological, made clear with phrases like “transitional phase.” But more importantly it falls into the same logical traps of earlier scientific managers. Clearly, Frankenberg, like early foresters, upholds scientific knowledge as the benchmark of actual knowledge. Local, practical experience does not count like theoretical, large-scale modeling. Frankenberg embraces the same logical framework that exclaims: locals destroyed their living space and informed scientists came and saved them from themselves. Furthermore, Frankenberg’s model, by dismissing previous uses of the land as pre-modern, implies that knowledge of the environment is now much more complete, so there is little need to look to the past for different ways of living with the land. The history of the Outer Banks challenges that assumption.

The approach to living with the Outer Banks that many scientists, probably including Frankenberg, have been suggesting since the 1970s—that of “planned retreat,” as Orrin Pilkey calls it—is clearly nothing new. Locals had been relocating their structures in

³ Dirk Frankenberg, *The Nature of the Outer Banks: Environmental Processes, Field Sites, and Development Issues, Corolla to Ocracoke*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 108.

response to environmental change for generations before the seashore park and the frenzy to buy small lots and build up to the shoreline made such a practice virtually impossible. While many locals supported the shoreline stabilization effort, multiple local voices also expressed confidence in the ultimate futility of that effort years before scientific studies proved what those most closely engaged with the coast had already presumed. If the so-called modern period in the history of the Outer Banks can claim increasing scientific knowledge, which certainly is true, it should also be characterized by the creation of a rigid, and modernistic, theoretical model of island stability and an explicit inability to change the framework around which new economic and cultural relationships were constructed even as scientific knowledge came to oppose that framework. The seemingly intractable relationships that created the Outer Banks could use a few examples from the past, and that will call for a different narrative.

Despite some recent scholarly work that reexamines the Outer Banks past and assumptions about our knowledge of that past, the old stories are repeated again and again. Because readership for work examining the Outer Banks usually comprises the vacationers and temporary residents at the shore, most histories remain uncritical. They emphasize those stories imbued with meaning for people who spend little time at the coast, stories that are self-affirming, romantic, and familiar. That is what sells. Most histories of the Outer Banks do not extend past the early 20th century. Challenges to these simplistic narratives exist, but they are often buried in journals, confined to the chatter of scientific circles. The basic narrative of environmental decline and redemption remains the most prominent example, one

which sets the parameters of historical arguments about the banks.⁴ Some recent popular works have told a different story. John Alexander and James Lazell wrote a very accessible section on Robert Dolan's and Paul Godfrey's work and the reversal of Park Service thinking about the nature of the seashore in their book, *Ribbon of Sand*, published in 1992.⁵ Most recently, and most explicitly, biologist and amateur historian Jim Senter's article "Live Dunes and Ghost Forests," marshaled an impressive number of scientific papers and historical work to show conclusively that the islands were not extensively forested and that, despite local alteration of the landscape, it was the volatile climate of the shore, not foolish or greedy loggers, that created migratory dunes.⁶ Nevertheless, the most recent study published by the Park Service, their first administrative history of the seashore, while a very well researched and thoughtful history in most respects, repeats the old analysis. Cameron Binkley, who was commissioned to do the study, writes carefully about dune management and conservation, but he also states outright that the banks were destroyed in the early 20th century from overgrazing and logging. Unlike the rest of his work, which was thoroughly documented, this surprising conclusion only cites "personal correspondence" with the current

⁴ The narrative of decline has been repeated in many places. A couple of widely read recent examples are Dirk Frankenberg's book, *The Nature of the Outer Banks*, 22-23, and Judith Mercier's history of a village in Currituck County that was not addressed in this thesis, *Duck: An Outer Banks Village*, (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2001), 71-77. Work like Mercier's is the most problematic because it is popularly written and only repeats the same arguments that David Stick made in his 1958 history of the Outer Banks when scientific knowledge still supported stabilizing the shore. It also repeats Stick's erroneous claims about the content of his father, Frank Stick's, first article advocating the park.

⁵ John Alexander and James Lazell, *Ribbon of Sand: The Amazing Convergence of the Ocean and the Outer Banks*, (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1992), 53-60. Alexander and Lazell's work is presented for the popular audience and is eloquently written. The section on Dolan and Godfrey is quite good, though it is brief. It is followed by a chapter on Blackbeard and a later one on the Wright brother's flight, always great subjects for sales.

⁶ Jim Senter, "Live Dunes and Ghost Forests: Stability and Change in the History of North Carolina's Maritime Forests," *North Carolina Historical Review* 80, no.3 (July 2003). Senter's work most directly influenced my own thinking on historic forestation of the North Carolina shore, not only due to his claims but also because it pointed me to many important ecological studies that support that claim.

Cape Hatteras Park historian, one month before the Park Service approved the final draft.⁷ The narrative of decline justified management in the 1930s, and the Park Service continued to employ that story even after many saw the park's purpose as preservation from potential future decline in the form of coastal development. As of December 2007, an interpretive plaque on the trail winding through Buxton Woods repeats the story for the public, showing an image of clear-cut woodlands and lauding the early 20th century conservationists prescient enough to save islanders from themselves.⁸

The Park Service has good reason for retaining the story. The narrative of decline and triumph creates a linear ascension that prevents critical analysis and oversimplifies the new set of complicated problems that followed the creation of the Cape Hatteras Park and the postindustrial Outer Banks. It teaches the public to defer to experts. To critique the purpose of this narrative is not to argue that expertise is not valuable and absolutely necessary in this increasingly contested coastal space. Nor is it to say that partial knowledge of environmental decline should prevent action. Fisheries management, for instance, has always relied on very limited knowledge of fish populations. Furthermore, most of those seeking to conserve the outer banks in the 1930s and in the decades that followed had laudable intentions. They attempted to save the land from what they saw as inexorable erosion and to construct a space that would bestow social and economic benefits both to locals and to the larger American public. Few would argue that fisheries should not be regulated or that conservationists should

⁷ Cameron Binkley, *The Creation and Establishment of Cape Hatteras National Seashore: The Great Depression Through Mission 66*, (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, 2007), 139. Binkley's work is otherwise excellent, and the late date to which the author attributes his information to the park service historian, Doug Stover, suggests that Binkley possibly had a different conclusion prior to that conversation.

⁸ Personal observation, 18 December 2007.

not have tried to save the islands in the 1930s if they were thought to be denuded and washing away. Rather, the experience of the Outer Banks should complicate and inform ongoing critiques of the early-twentieth-century modernist ethos that sought to apply *a priori* scientific models on environments and human societies alike. If science is to be useful, models are inevitable. Yet, the banks experience, like many others, suggests that scientists seeking to regulate and organize complex environments should allow more space for reactive reevaluations. It means admitting that we cannot know everything, admitting when the story is wrong, and continuing a commitment to seek new avenues of knowledge. It means learning from local experience and experiential knowledge. It means regulating from above and listening to those on the ground too.⁹

A significant alteration of the uses and claims that make up the modern Outer Banks toward any strategy of land use that allows for a moving shore would require more governmental regulation, not less. But it is ultimately those making claims on the seashore who must decide the future of the Outer Banks. Those who care about preserving the place might begin with a simple and uncomfortable premise: there were no illegitimate uses of the Outer Banks. Everyone who came to the North Carolina shore sought to modify the banks to suit their purposes. Whether to serve industry or recreation, the lands were re-imagined again and again for social and economic benefits. The multiple desires for the Outer Banks were all deeply American—to make a living independently with one’s labor; to purchase real estate, improve the land’s value, and turn a profit; to seek isolation and rejuvenation in open and

⁹ These assertions about modernism, *a priori* scientific models, and creating more reactive and elastic models that can respond to local conditions borrow heavily from James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), especially Langston’s excellent conclusion.

relatively wild spaces; to preserve that space and those experiences for future generations. Often certain users benefitted from other uses. Tourism was in many ways a trade off. Those attracted to the undeveloped and slow-paced life of the coast, a reflection of the area's historic isolation and poverty, brought much-needed wealth to the islands. Boosters seeking to profit from American moves toward beaches promoted new stories and created idealized images that convinced people to drive to the shore. The preservation of natural space was often wrapped up in the politics of development and the profit that promoters of adjacent lands sought to gain from the Outer Banks. Governmental projects at various levels supported locals' ability to make a living from the land beginning in the late 19th century, created the infrastructure that made development possible, and withdrew and managed the area of the first national seashore park among other federal spaces to preserve that experience for others while also enhancing the values of adjacent properties. Villagers serviced the incoming masses seeking fishing experiences or needing lodging, and they provided the local flavor that fulfilled desires for authenticity and quaintness. And just as conservationists and vacationers invited the nature that conformed to their desires and rejected what they did not like, so locals invited the governmental projects that helped to make their land productive—whether transportation networks, Lifesaving Stations, work relief, or preservation for tourism—and rejected the regulations that sought to limit how they could take advantage of those opportunities. Though one group of people often accused another of violating their vision of what the seashore should be, in truth all of these groups, together, created the modern Outer Banks. Locals, vacationers, boosters, and conservationists could all use a more complicated telling of the Outer Banks past.

Their desires converged on the road that traverses the land. It is NC highway 12 that keeps the Outer Banks in place. Take it away, and the future is much more uncertain. If one wants to know in what direction the Banks are headed, it would be a good bet to follow the road. In late March of 2007, the North Carolina Department of Transportation held public hearings in Manteo and Rodanthe to discuss options for replacing the Bonner Bridge over Oregon Inlet. Debates over how the NCDOT should proceed had been underway for 16 years at that point, ever since a dredge slammed into a bridge span in a storm in 1990 and took the bridge out of service for several weeks. The Bonner Bridge replacement had since grown into a great local controversy. The bridge was the vital link between Hatteras Island and the mainland. As many as 10,000 cars per day passed over Bonner Bridge during the tourist season. Its absence, even temporarily, would radically alter the economic dynamics of Hatteras Island villages. Were the bridge to collapse when large populations were threatened by storms, it would create a national disaster. Bonner Bridge was deemed unsafe in the early 1990s, not only because of the dredge incident but also because the inlet was migrating out from under the span, and the NCDOT decided to replace the structure in 1994. Stalled projects since then resulted in a sizable web-based local political action committee called replacethebridgenow.com. Villagers and local business owners had grown angry that the state seemed to put their lives and livelihoods at risk.¹⁰

In March of 2007, the DOT put several options before the public for building a new Hatteras Island link that “provides the flexibility to let the channel move.” There were two

¹⁰ North Carolina Department of Transportation, “Replacement of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge on NC 12,” Dare County, Public Hearing, Informational Pamphlet distributed at the Manteo public hearing, Dare County Justice Center, 28 March 2007; The statistic that 10,000 cars per day pass over the bridge during the summer and information about the local advocacy group is from www.replacethebridgenow.com, accessed 28 April 2008.

main possibilities with several variations. One option was a “parallel bridge,” which would replace the existing bridge, but with that option the future of the section of NC 12 running through Pea Island was questionable. There were multiple possibilities. Pea Island was one of the more dynamic stretches of the barrier shore and it was specifically set aside as a wildlife refuge, which depended on healthy marshlands. The new construction re-opened questions about keeping Pea Island more natural. The most expensive option with the parallel bridge was to continue the bridge, an elevated road running 13 miles along the existing highway easement, to Rodanthe, after which it would reconnect with NC 12. Were this chosen, the DOT remarked that the bridge over Pea Island was “expected to be offshore in future years and will be designed to meet that expectation.” Other options ranged from dune building and nourishment to protect “hot spot” areas along Pea Island, which was the *status quo*, to separately bridging the hot spots, to building the all-island bridge in phases. Costs were enormous, and the state had less money available than the cost of replacing the bridge alone. The second option was a colossal 17-mile bridge that arced dramatically into the sound, bypassed Pea Island altogether, and ended up in Rodanthe. This bridge was seen as most conducive to the purposes of the wildlife refuge because it would eliminate the road there, but it was also more than three times the cost of the simple replacement and would necessarily alter state and federal boundaries on northern Hatteras Island.¹¹

Of the sixteen people who rose to speak during the hearing in Manteo, only one supported the 17-mile span. She represented the Southern Environmental Law Center and

¹¹ The various options and costs for each option are detailed in the NCDOT, “Replacement of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge,” cited above. The first quote is from that document. The quote concerning the anticipation of having the bridge along Pea Island offshore in the future is from an informational video to prime those who came to the public hearing on the various options. The video was shown the day of the hearing, multiple times over several hours.

Audubon North Carolina. The remaining speakers all adamantly supported a bridge—any bridge—but most specifically advocated for the simpler continuance of the *status quo*. In the end the NCDOT chose a small bridge and the “phased approach” to bridge across Pea Island, which would entail construction over an estimated 30 years, but in reality it would also give the DOT the option of bridging hot spot areas or not as they chose or as money became available. As of spring of 2008, the bridge proposal continued to be challenged by the Southern Environmental Law Center as unduly damaging the Pea Island environment. On their website, replacethebridgenow.com complained that the safety rating of the Bonner Bridge was far below that of the bridge that had collapsed in Minnesota the year before, and they compared evacuation problems of a hypothetical collapsed Bonner Bridge to Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005.¹² Yet amid all of this controversy one option was never even discussed: the possibility of not replacing the bridge. Locals, businessmen, and conservationists alike agree that the Outer Banks should remain accessible; the challenge for all of them is to balance the scale of development with their desired uses for the shore. Most simply desire the Outer Banks to remain just as they are. But that is the one thing they cannot choose.

¹² The number of speakers and their preferences are from my personal notes as witness to the public hearing. The NCDOT’s decision and the objections of the Southern Environmental Law Center are from www.replacethebridgenow.com, accessed 28 April 2008. This included scanned file of a letter listing the Environmental Law Center’s objections.

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