

William Hilton Explores the Cape Fear River ^[1]

Although called Cape Fair by the earliest explorers of the North Carolina Coast, the Cape Fear region had its challenges for those wishing to navigate inland from the ocean. This account written in by three English explorers discusses their journey along the Cape Fear River and surrounding areas from September 1663 to February 1664.

From Tuesday the 29th of September, to Friday the 2d of October, we rang'd along the Shoar from Lat. 32 deg. 20 min. to Lat. 33 deg. 11 min. but could discern no Entrance for our Ship, after we had pass'd to the Northward of 32 deg. 40 min. On Saturday, Octob. 3. a violent Storm overtook us, the Wind between North and East; which Easterly Winds and Foul Weather continu'd till Monday the 12th; by reason of which Storms and Foul Weather, we were forced to get off to Sea, to secure Ourselves and Ship, and were driven by the Rapidity of a strong Current to Cape Hatteras in Lat. 35 deg. 30 min. On Monday the 12th aforesaid we came to an Anchor in seven Fathom ^[2] at Cape-Fair Road, and took the Meridian Altitude of the Sun, and were in Latitude 33 deg. 43 min. The Wind continuing still easterly, and foul Weather, till Thursday the 15th; and on Friday the 16th, the Wind being at N. W. we weigh'd and sail'd up Cape-Fair-River, some 4 or 5 Leagues ^[3], and came to an Anchor in 6 or 7 Fathom, at which time several Indians came on board, and brought us great Store of fresh Fish, large Mulletts ^[4], young Bass, Shads, and several other Sorts of very good well-tasted Fish. On Saturday the 17th, we went down to the Cape, to see the English Cattle, but could not find 'em, tho' we rounded the Cape: And having an Indian Guide with us, here we rode till Oct. 24. The Wind being against us, we could not go up the River with our Ship; but went on shoar, and view'd the Land of those Quarters ^[5].

On Saturday, we weigh'd, and sail'd up the River some 4 Leagues, or thereabouts. Sunday the 25th, we weigh'd again, and row'd up the River, it being calm, and got up some 14 Leagues from the Harbour's Mouth, where we mor'd ^[6] our Ship. On Monday Oct. the 26th, we went down with the awl ^[7], to Necoos, an Indian Plantation, and view'd the Land there. On Tuesday the 27th, we row'd up the main River, with our Long-Boat, and 12 Men, some 10 Leagues, or thereabouts. On Wednesday the 28th, we row'd up about 8 or 10 Leagues more. Thursday the 29th, was foul Weather, with much Rain and Wind, which forc'd us to make Huts, and lie still. Friday the 30th, we proceeded up the main River, 7 or 8 Leagues. Saturday the 31 st, we got up 3 or 4 Leagues more, and came to a Tree that lay cross the River; but because our Provisions were almost spent, we proceeded no farther, but return'd downward before Night, and on Monday the 2d of November, we came aboard our Ship. Tuesday the 3d, we lay still, to refresh ourselves. On Wednesday the 4th, we went 5 or 6 Leagues up the River, to search a Branch that run out of the main River towards the N. W. In which Branch we went up 5 or 6 Leagues; but not liking the Land, return'd on board that Night about Midnight, and call'd that Place Swampy-Branch. Thursday, November the 5th; we stay'd aboard. On Friday the 6th, we went up Greens-River, the Mouth of it being against the Place at which rode our Ship.

On Saturday the 7th, we proceeded up the said River some 14 or 15 Leagues in all, and found it ended in several small Branches; The Land, for the most part, being marshy and Swamps, we return'd towards our Ship, and got aboard it in the Night. Sunday November the 8th, we lay still, and on Monday the 9th, went again up the main River, being well stock'd with Provisions, and all things necessary, and proceeded upwards till Thursday noon, the 12th, at which time we came to a Place, where were two Islands in the Middle of the River; and by reason of the Crookedness of the River at that Place, several Trees lay cross both Branches, which stop'd the Passage of each Branch, so that we could proceed no farther with our Boat; but went up the River side by Land, some 3 or 4 Miles, and found the River wider and wider. So we return'd, leaving it, as far as we could see up a long Reach, running N. E. we judging ourselves near fifty Leagues North from the River's Mouth. In our Return, we view'd the Land on both Sides the River, and found as good Tracts of dry, well-wooded, pleasant, and delightful Ground, as we have seen any where in the World, with abundance of long thick Grass on it, the Land being very level, with steep Banks on both Sides the River, and in some Places very high, the Woods stor'd every where, with great Numbers of Deer and Turkies, we never going on Shoar, but we saw of each Sort; as also great Store of Partridges, Cranes, and Conies, in several Places; we like-wise heard several Wolves howling in the Woods, and saw where they had torn a Deer in Pieces. Also in the River we saw great Store of Ducks, Teal, Widgeon; and in the Woods, great Flocks of Parrakeeto's.

The Timber that the Woods afford, for the most part, consists of Oaks of four or five Sorts, all differing in Leaves, but each bearing very good Acorns. We measur'd many of The Oaks in Several Places, which we found to be, in Bigness, some Two, some Three, and others almost Four Fathom in Height, before you come to Boughs or Limbs; forty, fifty, sixty Foot, and some more; and those Oaks very common in the upper Parts of both Rivers; also a very tall large Tree of great Bigness, which some call Cyprus, the right Name we know not, growing in Swamps. Likewise Walnut, Birch, Beech, Maple, Ash, Bay, Willow, Alder, and Holly; and in the lowermost Parts innumerable Pines, tall and good for Boards of Masts ^[8], growing, for the most part, in barren and sandy, but in some Places up the River, in good Ground, being mixt amongst Oaks and other Timbers. We saw Mulberry-Trees, Multitudes ^[9], of Grape-Vines, and some Grapes which we eat of. We found a very large and good Tract of Land, on the N. W. Side of the River, thin of Timber, except here and there a very great Oak, and full of Grass, commonly as high as a Man's Middle, and in many Places to his Shoulders, where we saw many Deer, and Turkies; one Deer having very large Horns, and great Body, therefore call'd it Stag-Park. It being a very pleasant and delightful Place, we travell'd in it several Miles, but saw no End thereof. So we return'd to our Boat, and proceeded down the River, and came to another Place, some twenty five Leagues from the River's Mouth on the same Side, where we found a Place, no less delightful than the former; and as far as we could judge, both Tracts came into one. This lower Place we call'd Rocky Point, because we found many Rocks and Stones, of several Sizes, upon the Land, which is not common.

We sent our Boat down the River before us; ourselves travelling by Land, many Miles. Indeed we were so much taken with the Pleasantness of the Country, that we travell'd into the Woods too far to recover our Boat and Company that Night. The next day being Sunday, we got to our Boat; and on Monday the 16th of November, proceeded down to a Place on the East-Side of the River, some 23 Leagues from the Harbour's Mouth, which we call'd Turkey-Quarters, because we kill'd several Turkies thereabouts; we view'd the Land there, and found some Tracts of good Ground, and high, facing upon the River about one Mile inward, but backwards some two Miles, all Pine Land, but good Pasture ^[10] Ground: We return'd to our Boat, and proceeded down some 2 or 3 Leagues, where we had formerly view'd, and found it a Tract of as good Land, as any we have seen, and had as good Timber on it. The Banks on the River being high, therefore we call'd it High-Land-Point. Having view'd that, we proceeded down the River, going on Shoar in several Places on both Sides, it being generally large Marshes, and many of them dry, that they may more fitly be call'd Meadows. The Wood-Land against them is, for the most part, Pine, and in some Places as barren, as ever we saw Land, but in other Places good Pasture-Ground.

On Tuesday, November the 17th, we got aboard our Ship, riding against the Mouth of Green's River, where our Men were providing Wood, and fitting the Ship for the Sea: In the interim, we took a View of the Country on both sides of the River there, finding some good Land, but more bad, and the best not comparable to that above. Friday the 20th was foul Weather; yet in the Afternoon we weigh'd, went down the River about two Leagues, and came to an Anchor against the Mouth of Hilton's River, and took a View of the Land there on both sides, which appear'd to us much like that at Green's River. Monday the 23d, we went, with our Long-Boat well victual'd ^[11] and mann'd, up Hilton's River; and when we came three Leagues, or thereabouts, up the same, we found this and Green's River to come into one, and so continu'd for four or five Leagues, which makes a great Island betwixt ^[12] them. We proceeded still up the River, till they parted again, keeping up Hilton's River on the Larboard side, and follow'd the said River five or six Leagues farther, where we found another large Branch of Green's River to come into Hilton's, which makes another great Island.

On the Starboard ^[13] side going up, we proceeded still up the River some four Leagues, and return'd, taking a View of the Land on both sides, and then judg'd ourselves to be from our Ship some 18 Leagues W. and by N. One League below this Place, came four Indians in a Canoe to us, and sold us several Baskets of Acorns, which we satisfy'd them for, and so left them; but one of them follow'd us on the Shoar some two or three Miles, till he came on the Top of a high Bank, facing on the River; and as we row'd underneath it, the Fellow shot an Arrow at us, which very narrowly miss'd one of our Men, and stuck in the upper edge of the Boat; but broke in pieces, leaving the Head behind. Hereupon, we presently made to the Shoar, and went all up the Bank (except Four to guide the Boat) to look for the Indian, but could not find him: At last, we heard some sing, farther in the Woods, which we look'd up upon as a Challenge to us, to come and fight them. We went towards them with all Speed; but before we came in Sight of them, heard two Guns go off from our Boat; whereupon we retreated, as fast as we could, to secure our Boat and Men. When we came to them, we found all well, and demanded the Reason of their firing the Guns: They told us, that an Indian came creeping along the Bank, as they suppos'd, to shoot at them; and therefore they shot at him at a great distance, with small Shot, but thought they did him no Hurt; for they saw him run away. Presently after our Return to the Boat, and while we were thus talking, came two Indians to us, with their Bows and Arrows, crying Bonny, Bonny. We took their Bows and Arrows from them, and gave them Beads, to their Content; then we led them, by the Hand, to the Boat, and shew'd them the Arrow-head sticking in her Side, and related to them the whole Passage; which when they understood, both of them shew'd a great Concern, and signify'd to us, by Signs, that they knew nothing of it; so we let them go, and mark'd a Tree on the Top of the Bank, calling the Place Mount-Skerry.

We look'd up the River, as far as we could discern, and saw that it widen'd, and came running directly down the Country: So we return'd, viewing the Land on both sides the River, and finding the Banks steep in some places, but very high in others. The Bank-sides are generally Clay, and as some of our Company did affirm, some Marl ^[14]. The Land and Timber up this River is no way inferior to the best in the other, which we call the main River. So far as we could discern, this seem'd as fair, if not fairer, than the former, and we think runs farther into the Country, because a strong Current comes down, and a great deal more Drift-Wood. But, to return to the Business of the Land and Timber: We saw several Plots of Ground clear'd by the Indians, after their weak manner, compass'd round with great Timber Trees, which they are no-wise able to fell, and so keep the Sun from Corn-Fields very much; yet nevertheless, we saw as large Corn-stalks, or larger, than we have seen any where else: So we proceeded down the River, till we found the Canoe the Indian was in, who shot at us.

In the Morning, we went on Shoar, and cut the same in pieces. The Indians perceiving us coming towards them, ran away. Going to his Hutt, we pull'd it down, broke his Pots, Platters, and Spoons, tore the Deer-Skins and Matts in pieces, and took away a Basket of Acorns; and afterwards proceeded down the River 2 Leagues, or thereabouts, and came to another Place of Indians, bought Acorns and some Corn of them, and went downwards 2 Leagues more.

At last, espying an Indian peeping over a high Bank, we held up a Gun at him; and calling to him, Skerry, presently several Indians came in Sight of us, and made great Signs of Friendship, saying Bonny, Bonny. Then running before us, they endeavour ^[15] to persuade us to come on shoar; but we answer'd them with stern Countenances ^[16], and call'd out, Skerry, taking up our Guns, and threatening to shoot at them, but they still cry'd Bonny, Bonny: And when they saw they could not prevail, nor persuade us to come on shoar, two of them came off to us in a Canoe, one paddling with a great Cane, the other with his Hand. As soon as they overtook us, they laid hold of our Boat, sweating and blowing, and told us, it was Bonny on shoar, and at last persuaded us to go on shoar with them.

As soon as we landed, several Indians, to the Number of near 40 lusty ^[17] Men, came to us, all in a great Sweat, and told us Bonny: We shew'd 'em the Arrow-Head in the Boat-Side, and a Piece of the Canoe we had cut in Pieces: Whereupon, the chief Man amongst them made a long Speech, threw Beads into our Boat, which is a Sign of great Love and Friendship, and gave us to understand, that when he heard of the Affront ^[18] which we had receiv'd, it caus'd him to cry; and that he and his Men were come to make Peace with us, assuring us, by Signs, that they would tye the Arms, and cut off the Head, of the Fellow who had done us that Wrong; And for a farther Testimony of their Love and Good-Will towards us, they presented us with two very handsome, proper, young Indian Women, the tallest that ever we saw in this Country; which we suppos'd to be the King's Daughters, or Persons of Distinction amongst them.

Those young Women were so ready to come into our Boat; that one of them crowded in, and would hardly be persuaded to go out again. We presented the King with a Hatchet and several Beads, and made Presents of Beads also to the young Women, the chief Men, and the rest of the Indians, as far as our Beads would go. They promis'd us, in four Days, to come on board our Ship, and so departed from us. When we left the Place, which was soon after, we call'd it Mount-Bonny, because we had there concluded a firm Peace. Proceeding down the River 2 or 3 Leagues farther, we came to a Place where were 9 or 10 Canoes all together. We went ashore there, and found several Indians; but most of them were the same which had made Peace with us before. We staid very little at that Place, but went directly down the River, and came to our Ship, before day. Thursday the 26th of November, the Wind being at South, we could not go down to the River's Mouth; but on Friday the 27th, we weigh'd at the Mouth of Hilton's River, and got down a League towards the Harbour's Mouth. On Sunday the 29th, we got down to Crane-Island, which is 4 Leagues or thereabouts, above the Entrance of the Harbour's Mouth.

On Tuesday the 1st of December, we made a Purchase of the River and Land of Cape-Fair, of Wat-Coosa, and such other Indians, as appear'd to us to be the chief of those Parts. They brought us Store of fresh Fish aboard, as Mulletts, Shads, and other sorts very good. This River is all fresh Water, fit to drink. Some 8 Leagues within the Mouth, the Tide runs up about 35 Leagues, but stops and rises a great deal farther up. It flows at the Harbour's Mouth, S. E. and N. W. 6 Foot at Neap-Tides, and 8 Foot at Spring-Tides ^[19]. The Channel on the East side, by the Cape-Shoar, is the best,

and lies close aboard the Cape-Land, being 3 Fathoms at high Water, in the shallowest Place in the Channel, just at the Entrance; But as soon as you are past that Place, half a [Cables Length](#) ^[20] inward, you have 6 or 7 Fathoms, a fair turning Channel into the River, and so continuing 5 or 6 Leagues upwards. Afterwards the Channel is more difficult, in some Places 6 or 7 Fathoms, in others 4 or 5, and in others but 9 or 10 Foot, especially where the River is broad. When the River comes to part, and grows narrow, there it is all Channel from side to side, in most Places; tho' in some you shall have 5, 6, or 7 Fathoms, but generally 2 or 3, Sand and [Ooze](#) ^[21].

We view'd the Cape-Land, and judg'd it to be little worth, the Woods of it being shrubby and low, and the Land sandy and barren; in some Places Grass and [Rushes](#) ^[22], in others nothing but clear Sand: A Place fitter to starve Cattle, in our Judgment, than to keep'em alive; yet the Indians, as we understand, keep the English Cattle down there, and suffer them not to go off of the said Cape. (as we suppose) because the Country Indians shall have no Part with them; and therefore'tis likely, they have fallen out about them, which shall have the greatest Share. They brought on board our Ship very good and fat Beef several times, which they sold us at a very reasonable Price; also fat and very large Swine, good and cheap; but they may thank their Friends of New-England, who brought their Hogs to so fair a Market. Some of the Indians brought very good Salt aboard us, and made Signs, pointing to both sides of the River's Mouth, that there was great Store thereabouts. We saw up the River, several good Places for the setting up of Corn of Saw-Mills. In that time, as our Business call'd us up and down the River and Branches, we kill'd of wild Fowl, 4 Swans, 10 Geese, 29 Cranes, 10 Turkeys, 40 Ducks and Mallards, 3 dozen of Parrakeeto's, and 6 dozen of other small Fowls, as [Curlues](#) ^[23] and Plover, &c.

[Whereas there was a Writing left in a Post, at the Point of Cape-Fair River, by those New-England-Men, that left Cattle with the Indians there, the Contents whereof tended not only to the Disparagement of the Land about the said River, but also to the great Discouragement of all such as should hereafter come into those Parts to settle:](#) In answer to that scandalous Writing, We, whose Names are underwritten, do affirm, That we have seen, facing both sides the River and Branches of Cape-Fair aforesaid, as good Land, and as well timber'd, as any we have seen in any other Part of the World, sufficient to [accommodate](#) ^[24] Thousands of our English Nation, and lying [commodiously](#) ^[25] by the said River's Side. On Friday the 4th of December, the Wind being fair, we put out to Sea, bound for Barbados; and, on the 6th of February, 1663/4, came to an Anchor in Carlisle-Bay; it having pleas'd God, after several apparent Dangers both by Sea and Land, to bring us all in Safety to our long-wish'd for and much desir'd Port, to render an Account of our Discovery; the [Verity](#) ^[26] of which we do assert.

Anthony Long
William Hilton
Peter Fabian

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Places:

The Cape Fear River's hidden entrance and many islands didn't make it easy for early explorers and settlers to navigate.



[40]

Barbados, located in the southern Caribbean (at the right edge of this map), was a British colony from 1627 until its independence in 1966. In the seventeenth century, Barbados was home to large sugar plantations worked by African slaves. Because land was scarce, English settlers there were continually in search of new opportunities such as, in this case, Carolina.



[41]

Because the Cape Fear River -- unlike North Carolina's other major rivers -- empties directly into the Atlantic Ocean, it provided the colony's best natural port. Today, the Port of Wilmington remains the state's largest port.

Primary Sources:

