William Hilton Explores the Cape Fear River

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 Shore 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 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, 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 Mullets, 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.
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.

*On Saturday, we weigh'd, and sail'd up the River some 4 Leagues, or thereabouts. Sunday the 25th, we weight 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 our Ship. On Monday Oct. the 26th, we went down with the Yawl, to Necoes, 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 31st, 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 Turkeys, 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 Parakeetto's.

The Timber that the Woods afford, for the most part, consists of Oaks of four or five Sorts, all differing in Leavves, 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, 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 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 Turkeys; 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, which 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 Turky-Quarters, because we kill'd several Turkeys thenceabouts; 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, 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 weighed, 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 appeared to us much like that at Green's River. Monday the 23rd, we went, with our Long-Boat well victual'd 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 continued for four or five Leagues, which makes a great Island inland, [31] where they 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 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. by N. One League below this Place, came four Indians in a Canoe to us, and sold us several Baskets of Acorns, which we satisfaction'd for, and so let 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 him, 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 up all the Bank (except Four to guide the Boat) to look for the Indian, but could not find him: At last, we heard some song, rather in the Woods, which we look'd upon as a Challenge to us, to come and fight them. We went towards them with all Speed; but before we came in sight, we 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 signified by us, Signs, that they knew nothing of it; so we let them go, and mark'd it a Tree on the Top of the Bank, calling the Place Mount-Skeryn.

We look'd up the River, as far as we could discern, and saw that it didn't make any great Deal Drift Wood. But, to return to the Business of the Land and Timber: We saw several Points 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 Town Sites, or larger, than we have seen any where else: So we proceeded down the River, till we found the Canoe the Indian was in, nor 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 Mats 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 went down towards them, and went departed from them.

At last, copying an Indian peeping over a high Bank, we held up a Gun at him; and calling to him, Skeryn, presently several Indians came in Sight of us, and made great Signs of Friendship, saying bonny, bonny. They told us, that they were the Alfeo Indians, or those who live at the mouth of the River; and that he who shew'd them a Place were the King of their Part, and that we should persuade us to come on shoar; but we answered them with stern Countenance, [16] and call'd out, Skeryn, 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 good Cane, the other with his Hand. As soon as they overtook us, they cast hold of our Boat, sweating and blaming us; 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[30] Men, came to us, in all a great Sweat, and told us Bonny: We shew'd them the Arrow-Head in the Boat-side, and a Piece of the Canoe we had cut in Places: 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 we had received it, 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 try 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. These 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 go to a Place five Leagues below where they shew'd us, and there return'd, taking a View of the Land on both sides, and then judg'd themselves to be from our Ship some 18 Leagues W. by N. One League below this Place, came four Indians in a Canoe to us, and sold us several Baskets of Acorns, which we satisfaction'd for, and so let 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 him, 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 up all the Bank (except Four to guide the Boat) to look for the Indian, but could not find him: At last, we heard some song, rather in the Woods, which we look'd upon as a Challenge to us, to come and fight them. We went towards them with all Speed; but before we came in sight, we 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 signified by us, Signs, that they knew nothing of it; so we let them go, and mark'd it a Tree on the Top of the Bank, calling the Place Mount-Skeryn.

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