William Hilton Explores the Cape Fear River

Although called Cape Fish 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 by three English explorers details their journey along the Cape Fear River and surrounding areas from September 1663 to February 1664.

From the 29th of September, to Friday the 2d of October, we rang'd along the Shoor from Lat. 32° degr. 20 min. to Lat. 33° 30 min. but could discern no Entrance for our Ship, after we had went to the Northwest, Lat. 32° 40 min. On Friday the 3d, to Lat. 32° 50 min. but on Saturday, the 12th; by reason of which Storms and Foul Weather, we were forced to go off to Sea, to secure our Selves and Ship, and were driven by the Rapidity of a strong Current to Cape Hatteras in Lat. 35° 30 min. On Monday the 12th aforesaid we came to an Anchor in seven fathoms at Cape Fear River, thirty five miles West of Cape Lookout, and were in Latitude 33° 43 min. the Wind contrary, and with great Darkness, we went on towards the Inlet, and on Friday the 16th of November, the S. W., we weighed and sail'd up Cape Fear River, finding the Land here between 6 and 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, which we rost, and preserved in our Boats. This River is all fresh Water, fit to drink. Some 8 Leagues within the Mouth, the Tide runs up about 35 Leagues, but stops 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 the next Day, we went up the River, to see if we could not go up to the River with our Ship; but went on shore, and viewed the Land of those Quarters.

On Saturday, we weight'd, and sail'd up the River some 4 Leagues, or thereabouts, Sunday the 25th, we weight'd again, and row'd up the River, it being calm, and got up some 14 Leagues from the Harbour’s Mouth, where we mord to the Ship. On Monday the 6th, we went down with the wind, to Necoos, an Indian Plantation, and view’d the Land there. On Tuesday the 27th, we row’d up the River, and came to the mouth of the same, that runs into the River, and is about 12 Miles long, and wider above than below. The next Day we came down as far as that Place, for we could not see the Land thence, leaving us to see the mouth of the River, and what we might find there, and if we could see up a long Reach, running N. E. we judging ourselves nearer fifty Leagues North from the River. In our Return, we view’d the Land on both sides of the River, and found as Goods of trade, well-wooded, pleasant, and delightful Ground, as we have seen any where in the World, with abundance of thick Long Grass on it, the Land being very level, with steep Banks on both sides of the River, and in some Places very high, with great Numbers of Deer and Acorns and some Corn of them, and went downwards the same, so we weight’d the Ship, and set sail’d.

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 Swamp, we return’d towards our Boat, and got aboard it, 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 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, and a Boy, who they brought in a Canoe, and presented to us Beads also.

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 Land and Timber on both Sides of the River, and found 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 weight’d, went down the River, and past the Passage to the Mouth of that River, which we call’d Turky-Quarters, because we kill’d several Turkies thereabouts; we view’d the Land there, and found some Tracts of good Ground, and high, facing the Ocean; and saw there many Trees, and Deer; and Turky, Diau! Diau! Diau! and Arrows, crying Bonny, Bonny. Then running before us, they came with us in the Canoe, and gave us Beads, crying Bonny, Bonny. So we proceed’d down the River, till we found the Canoe the Indian was in, who shot at us.

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. 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, and being come near, we killed him in a Canoe, at that Place. We went on, and at that Place, we found a good Store of Young Indian Women, who came in Canoes, and presented us Beads, crying Bonny, Bonny. We return’d to the Boat, and proceed’d down the River, and came to another Place, some twenty five Leagues from the River’s Mouth on the same Side, where we saw 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 went 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 travel’d into the Woods without our Boat, and that night the next Day, we got into our Boat; and on the 16th of November, proceed’d down to a Place on the East-Side of the River, the Wind being S. W. and good. In our Return, we found a Place, which was better than any where in the World, with abundance of thick Long Grass on it, the Land being very level, with steep Banks on both sides of the River, and in some Places very high, they might be fifty or sixty fathoms deep. The Meadow- 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 Wednesday, the 23rd, we went, with our Long-Boat well provision’d, and marr’d it, 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 between them. We proceed’d still up the River, till they parted again, keeping us Hilton’s River on the Land-side, and followed the said River five or six Leagues farther, where we found another Branch of Green’s River to come into Hilton’s, which makes another great Island.

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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 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 Oaze.

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, 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'ths 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 cal'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 Parakeets, and 6 dozen of other small Fowls, as Curlues 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 Decrepitament 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 Thousands of our English Nation, and lying commodiously 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 of which we do assert.

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

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:
This map of North Carolina’s coast, drawn in 1709, refers to Cape Fear by its original name, “Cape Fair.”

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