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Pearls

by William S. Powell, 2006

In modern times, no oyster species native to North Carolina's [coastal region](#) [2] creates pearls of any value. Pearls were long gathered, however, by coastal Indians and used as ornaments or bartered for skins and other articles in the region that became North Carolina. English explorer [Philip Amadas](#) [3], who visited [Roanoke Island](#) [4] in 1584, presented black pearls to [Queen Elizabeth I](#) [5]. Members of the 1585 colonization venture also took pearls to sell in England to help cover the expenses of the voyage, but the queen seized them all for herself. Some had been acquired by [Ralph Lane](#) [6] and [Sir Francis Drake](#) [7] in trade with the natives. Lane mentioned a rope of black pearls that he had lost overboard in returning to the ship in a storm. One member of the colony reported amassing a collection of 5,000 pearls, some of which he used to make "a fayre chaine" that he intended as gift for the queen, but it, too, was lost in the storm.

The Indians valued their oyster beds as a source of pearls and prohibited "strangers" from visiting them. Black pearls, they noted, came from oysters in shallow waters, whereas the choice "white, great, and round" ones were found in deeper water. [John Lawson](#) [8], who visited one of the sandy islands on the Carolina coast in 1709, reported that he had found the kind of oyster shells in which pearls developed.

Subjects: [Precolonial period \(pre-1600\)](#) [9][Colonial period \(1600-1763\)](#) [10][Natural resources](#) [11][UNC Press](#) [12]**Authors:** [Powell, William S.](#) [13]**Origin - location:** [Coastal Plain](#) [14]**From:** [Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) [15]

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