

Blackbeard the Pirate: A Reappraisal of His Life and Times

(Adapted from www.nchistoricsites.org/bath)

Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard---the most notorious pirate of them all---once made the area near Bath, NC his home. The famous rogue lived on Plum Point (often referred to as "Teach's Point"). From a vantage point in front of the Bonner House, looking south across the bay, the stretch of land visible on the left is Plum Point. The foundation ruins of an ancient house on Plum Point have been rumored over the years to be the remains of Blackbeard's home. And fortune seekers have dug many a hole in the area in search of Blackbeard's buried treasure. Edward Teach served as a privateer during Queen Anne's War (1702-1713), and later---as Blackbeard---named his flagship Queen Anne's Revenge.

For many years, in an open field between Plum Point and Bath Town, there was a round brick structure that resembled a huge oven. A tale was told that Blackbeard used this device to boil tar with which to caulk his vessels. As the legend grew, the structure became known as Teach's Kettle. The place became such a popular tourist attraction that the surrounding crops became threatened, and the farmer who owned the land finally covered the old oven with earth and plowed it over. Across the bay is a point of land called Archball Point. It was near this location that colonial Governor Charles Eden lived during his time in Bath. Eden, who hailed from an ancient and prominent English family, became governor of the colony in May 1714. The governor occupied a 400 acre plantation on the west side of Bath Creek. Blackbeard arrived in Bath sometime in June 1718, and immediately received from Governor Eden the "gracious pardon" of the Royal Proclamation. And legend says that a subterranean passage was cut from the cellar of Eden's mansion to the steep bank of the creek, so that Blackbeard could enter and depart without being seen. The implication, of course, is that Eden was taking his own share of the pirate's loot. Such a tunnel probably never existed, but there was a path of ballast rocks that led from Eden's place to a pier on the creek nearby.

Searching the plantations along the Pamlico, Blackbeard chose the teenage daughter of a Bath County planter as his fourteenth bride. Governor Eden performed the wedding ceremony, and this incident has been suggested as proof that the pirate and the governor were friends allied in the commission of piratical acts. In all probability, however, Eden was the only official in the area who could legally perform such ceremonies.

Tobias Knight---secretary of the colony---purchased the plantation adjoining Eden's in June 1718. It was Knight's house that stood on what is now Archbell Point. And it was Knight---not Governor Eden---who was later tried before Council for being an accessory to piratical acts associated with Blackbeard and his crew.

Another tall tale affords that Blackbeard---who was rumored to have had 14 wives and 13 children---was an unsuccessful suitor of Governor Eden's daughter. The girl is said to have rejected Teach because she was already engaged to another man. Angered and jealous, Blackbeard supposedly captured his rival and cut off the man's hands before dumping the body into the sea. Teach then placed the severed hands in a jeweled casket, and promptly forwarded the parcel to Miss Eden. The heartbroken girl then languished and died, as was the fashion in case of disrupted romance. Such are the tall tales that become attached to notorious criminals. Charles Eden never had a daughter. He did, however, have a stepdaughter named Penelope.

The sleepy little village became a lively place when Blackbeard and his crew sailed into port. They traded their ill-gotten gains at reasonable prices, engaged in wild sprees, and replenished their ships for additional sorties to keep the cycle going. All of this bought economic prosperity to the region. People came from great distances to buy foreign goods in the shops in Bath. The "ordinaries" (hotels of the era) became crowded with boarders, and Bath Town sprang to life. The pirates, with no shortage of hard drinking and swearing, regaled the villagers with wild tales of their adventures on the high seas.

Blackbeard, known strictly as a sea robber, quickly became a subject of fascination on land---and people were soon clamoring to meet and talk with him. The curious citizens of Bath afforded the infamous pirate a decree of celebrity. Here was a notorious villain, pardoned by a royal proclamation, who was seeking retirement in their midst. Wealthy planters invited Blackbeard into their homes, and Teach entertained lavishly in his own home in Bath. Before long, the sea robber boasted that there was not a home in North Carolina where he would not be invited for dinner. With a compelling personality, Teach convinced the landlocked villagers---who no doubt wanted to be convinced---that the pirates were their friends. As historian Robert Lee has noted, Blackbeard lived in an era when unpardoned acts of piracy

were “condoned, if not sanctioned, by the law [and] it was not beneath persons of family and respectability to take part in such acts.” A frontier morality was very much in existence when Blackbeard came calling in Bath in 1718. Piracy was a “fashionable vice,” and in the late seventeenth century nearly every colony in North America was offering encouragement to the pirates. North Carolina’s experience with piracy in the early eighteenth century was similar to that of other English colonies of an earlier date. Due to its isolation and thinly scattered population, the troubles brought by colonial piracy were delayed in North Carolina. The colony was, in fact, the last to eradicate piracy. A comfortable existence and the king’s pardon notwithstanding, the semi-retirement of Blackbeard and his crew was short lived. Within a few months of settling near Bath, the rogues returned to the high seas for one last round of generalized pirating. Shortly thereafter, in November 1718, Blackbeard’s reign as the king of all pirates came to an end. Teach was slain in battle at Ocracoke Inlet by a contingent of the British Royal Navy under command of Lt. Robert Maynard.

In 1719, the year following Blackbeard’s death, Tobias Knight—secretary of the colony—was acquitted of charges alleging he was an accessory to acts of piracy associated with Teach and his crew. Knight’s skillful legal rebuttal successfully challenged every point against him, and reminded the Council that American colonial law did not allow Negro slaves (even those who had become pirates!) to be witnesses against a white person in court. Seriously ill at the time, Knight died a few months after the trial.

After Blackbeard was killed, the story of how he was beheaded during a battle with sailors of the Royal Navy soon passed into the folklore of North Carolina. And it was not long before weird tales of Blackbeard’s ghost, in search of a head that was lost in battle, began to permeate coastal villages along the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. Unexplained lights and other strange phenomena were quickly attributed to the pirate’s ghost—especially during the strong storms that frequently batter the coast of North Carolina. “Teach’s light” has been seen on both land and sea, and perhaps the most famous manifestation of this phenomenon has occurred over the years near the very place where Blackbeard once lived—Bath Town.

Dr. T. P. Bonner, son of Joseph Bonner, was a graduate of both UNC and Yale University. In 1898, Dr. Bonner explained the strange phenomenon of Teach’s Light: There have been many strange phenomenon at the mouth of Bath Creek, incomprehensible to all who have witnessed it. I, myself, am not superstitious. I have seen the smoke of battle for four years, and my limbs bear an eternal witness to the fact; and am not frightened at a myth; but I must admit that a feeling of awe possessed me, as with my father and a dozen other men, of reputable reputation, I have stood on my father’s piazza during a violent storm, when the river and the creek was a mass of foam, and the spume was seathed like a snow storm. A ball of fire as large as or larger than a man’s head, sailed back and forth from Plum Point (location of Teach’s home) to Archbell Point all that night without any deviation from a direct line, while the wind was blowing at the rate of 40 miles an hour. No phosphorescent or jelly mass could have withstood the gale without being swept out of existence. There are men living today who will substantiate what I write. This occurred during every violent storm.

Analysis Questions:

- 1- Where in NC did Blackbeard live?
- 2- What “gift” did Governor Eden give Blackbeard upon his arrival in NC?
- 3- There is a conspiracy theory involving the relationship between Blackbeard and Eden. Describe the theory.
- 4- How did the town benefit from Blackbeard’s piracy?
- 5- Why was NC so accepting of piracy?
- 6- How did Blackbeard die?