Fort Raleigh

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • NORTH CAROLINA

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1969—392-708/10

ADMINISTRATION

Fort Raleigh National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent of Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Box 457, Manteo, NC 27954, is in charge of the site.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

The scene of earliest English colonizing attempts within the limits of present-day United States, and birthplace of the first English child born in the New World.

The north end of Roanoke Island is the site of Sir Walter Raleigh's ill-fated attempts to establish an English community in America. It is our link with the vibrant era of Queen Elizabeth I and the golden age of the English Rennaissance, a period of exploration and expansion when men of vision strove to establish colonies in distant lands to benefit the Mother Country. (Spain had already grown rich and powerful through her colonial empire.) Here on Roanoke Island, England's first serious attempt to turn her dream of empire into reality ended in failure and the strange disappearance of the colony of 1587.

EXPLORATION OF ROANOKE ISLAND

In 1584, one year after his half-brother Sir Humphrey Gilbert perished in an attempt to settle in Newfoundland, Sir Walter Raleigh obtained a patent to explore and settle in the New World. Imbued with a desire to realize his brother's dream of an English empire in America, Raleigh sent Captains Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe to examine the North American Coast.

They returned with glowing reports of tall trees, of land overgrown with sweet juicy grapes, and of birds so abundant that "a flocke of Cranes . . . arose under us, with such a crye redoubled by many Ecchoes, as if an armie of men had showted all together." They marveled at the rich soil and mild climate which produced three crops of corn a season in the natives' gardens. Two of these friendly robust natives, Manteo and Wanchese, returned to England with them. The land Amadas and Barlowe had explored was later named "Virginia" after Elizabeth, their Virgin Queen. The name was more than an honor; it represented Elizabeth's endorsement and support of the attempts to establish an English foothold in the New World, even in the face of all-powerful Spain.

With Raleigh's enthusiastic guidance and aid, the first colony was sent to "this paradise of the world" in 1585. It was a military venture under the command of his cousin, Sir Richard Grenville. The group chose to settle on the north end of Roanoke Island, which Amadas and Barlowe had described as "a most pleasant and fertile ground." There they built a fort under the direction of Ralph Lane and called it "the newe forte in Virginia."

When Grenville returned to England for supplies, Lane was appointed governor. Under his leadership, the group began to explore the surrounding islands and mainland, relying on Indian sources for their food supply as they expanded their quest for pearls, copper, and gold. The country was explored for a distance of about 80 miles to the south and 130 miles to the north. Thomas Hariot, an eminent geographer and scientist with the expedition, described the plant and animal life, the uses of it, and the native way of life. This data was published under the title New Found Land of Virginia, which was later expanded and supplemented by John White's watercolor drawings.

The colonists' quest for riches involved them in local Indian wars. Food became scarce, and day after day they anxiously watched the horizon for the returning supply ships. At last sails appeared, and Sir Francis Drake anchored off the inlet. Lane and his men accepted Drake's offer of ships and supplies to explore farther north for a better harbor. However, the ships were lost the next day in a storm. Weak and discouraged, the entire expedition decided to return to England with Drake.

Shortly afterward, Sir Richard Grenville, after returning to Roanoke with supplies, searched for the departed expedition. When he couldn't find it, he settled 15 men on the island with provisions for 2 years. They were to hold the country in the Queen's name until another colony could be established.

THE LOST COLONY, 1587

Immediately Raleigh began to shape plans for another colony, this time a true settlement of more than 100 men, women, and children. Raleigh appointed John White as governor, aided by 12 assistants, and directed them to settle on Chesapeake Bay. But their pilot refused to sail that far. The colonists remained on Roanoke Island, where they had stopped to look for the 15 men that Grenville had left behind the year before. They could not locate them; the only clue to their disappearance was a skeleton found near the place where the men had been left.

White and his colonists soon began to have trouble with the Indians. In a succession of skirmishes fought only a few days after the colony arrived, several colonists and Indians died.

Meanwhile, the ships were being readied for the voyage home. Governor White was persuaded to return to England for additional provisions, although he was reluctant to leave behind a newborn granddaughter, Virginia Dare. He set sail a few days after her birth.

England, when White arrived, was in imminent danger of a Spanish invasion. The danger was so great that the Queen refused to allow any large ships to leave. The two small pinnaces that were permitted to sail never reached the New World. Despite petitions to the Queen through Sir Walter Raleigh, White was unable to secure further relief for the colony.

He was finally able to sail in 1590—almost 3 years after his departure from Roanoke. When he returned, the colony had disappeared. The houses had been taken down and the settlement area enclosed within a high palisade, "very fort-like." On one prominent tree or post at the entrance to the palisade, the bark had been peeled off and the letters C R O A T O A N carved on it. The cross, a prearranged mark signifying distress or forced departure, was not there. White concluded that the colonists would be found on Croaton Island (most of modern Ocracoke and part of Hatteras Island) or among the friendly Croatoan Indians farther inland. A series of storms and accidents forced the ships to return to England and White was unable to search for the colonists. The fate of the Lost Colony is still a mystery.

England did not successfully colonize the New World until 17 years later when a small group of hardy men and women succeeded at Jamestown. In a sense, the colony of 1587 was sacrificed to insure English victory over the Spanish Armada. But the blame should not lie entirely with England, because the colonists failed to become a part of the web of life on Roanoke Island; they did not make the best use of the offerings of the forest and sound, but relied on England for their food.

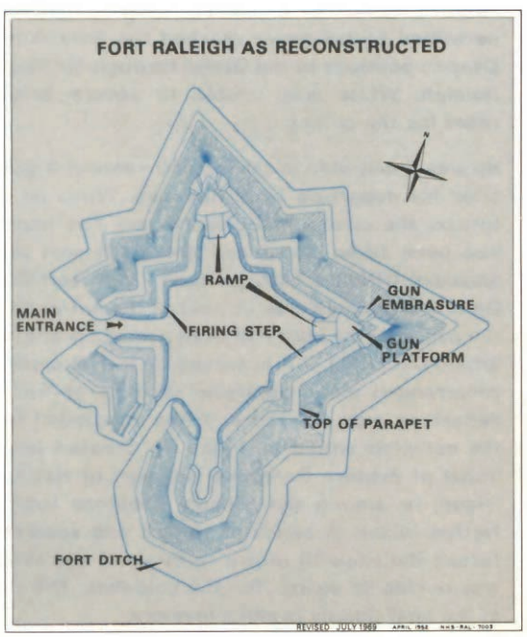
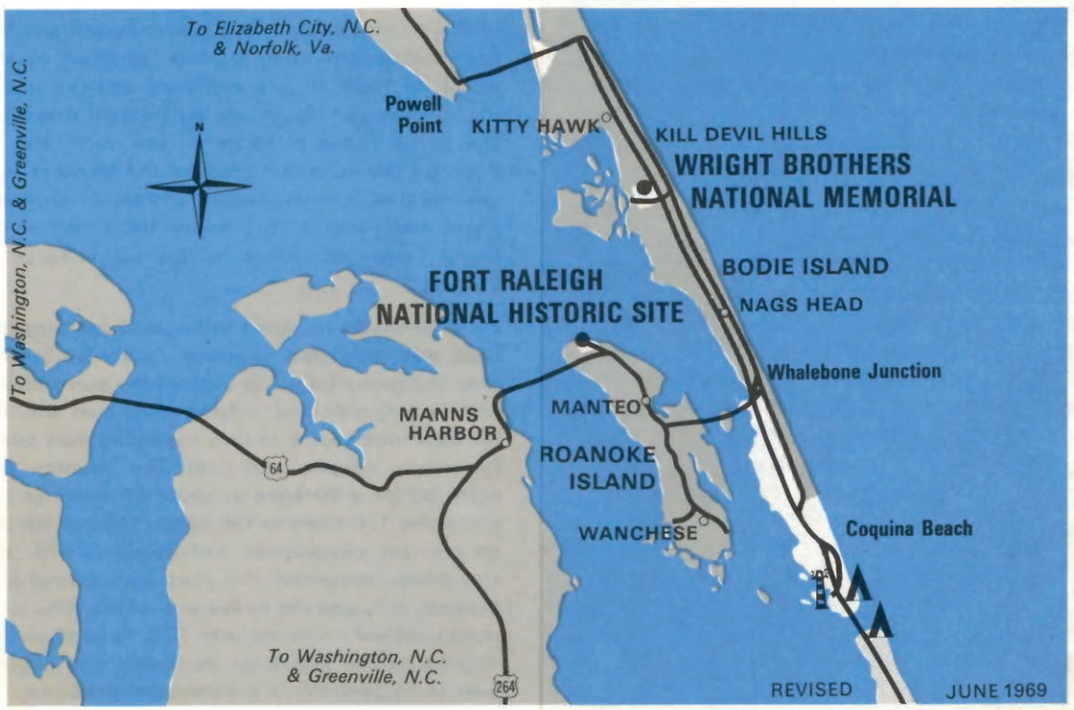
THE HISTORIC SITE

Fort Raleigh was designated a National Historic Site on April 5, 1941. Within its nearly 144-acre area, parts of the settlement sites of 1585 and 1587 are included. Ralph Lane's "new forte in Virginia," located within the site, was explored archeologically in 1947-48 and restored in 1950. The village site, presumably close to the fort, has not been located. Excavated artifacts are displayed in the visitor center.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Fort Raleigh National Historic Site is on U.S. 64-264, 3 miles north of Manteo, N.C., 92 miles southeast of Norfolk, Va., and 67 miles southeast of Elizabeth City, N.C. The visitor center has exhibits telling the story of Raleigh's colony as well as a film about the English attempt at settlement here. Special services are available for groups if advance arrangements are made with the superintendent.

The Thomas Hariot Trail starts near the fort and winds through pleasant woodland to Roanoke Sound and back.

In summer, the "Lost Colony," a symphonic-drama by Paul Green, is produced in the Waterside Theatre. The dates and hours are fixed by the Roanoke Island Historical Association.

Adjacent to the historic site is the Elizabethan Garden, maintained by the Garden Club of North Carolina, Inc. The admission fee is set by that organization.