

A FURY FROM HELL

BY CONSTANCE BOND

AS UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGISTS PULL ARTIFACTS FROM WHAT MAY BE THE WRECK OF BLACKBEARD'S FLAGSHIP, HISTORIANS RAISE NEW QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LEGENDARY PIRATE

IT'S LATE MAY 1718, AND THE GOOD PEOPLE OF CHARLES TOWN, IN the colony of South Carolina, are in an uproar. The nearly 20,000 residents of this fledgling, walled city have had their hands full fighting with the Yamasee, Creek and other Indian tribes angered by the spread of rice plantations. And now, this.

Moored just outside the entrance to their harbor and blocking all traffic is a flotilla of four vessels. Three of them are sloops of modest size. But the fourth, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, is a true pirate ship. More than 80 feet long, the square-rigger sports three tall masts, a raised quarterdeck at its stern, dozens of cannon ominously poking through its gunports and a deck swarming with some 150 crew. On the deck, a large man with a long black beard curses and rages. Edward Teach, nick-

OR WAS HE?

A 1736 engraving reveals Blackbeard's reputed trick of hiding lighted fuses under his hat.

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named Blackbeard, is holding the city hostage. He and his company of some 400 men have waylaid and plundered several ships, capturing the crews and passengers, including some of Charles Town's most prominent citizens. His demand? Deliver a chest of medicine, or he will deliver the prisoners' heads and burn the vessels.

Shortly after capturing them, the pirates herd the prisoners off the *Queen Anne's Revenge* and shut them in darkness in the hold of a captured vessel. Huddled together, the captives listen in terror for the pirates' footfalls on the wooden deck above, certain that their return will signal death by cutlass, pistol or a toss into the drink.

But it doesn't happen. Within hours, the hatches are opened and the prisoners pulled back on deck. Then, in a manner more befitting a CEO holding an impromptu business meeting than a bloodthirsty madman, Teach calls a delegation of the prisoners into his own cabin on the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. Calmly, he explains that they were taken off the ship so that the pirates could hold a "general council" to decide on their next move.

It is an odd departure from the anticipated script of mayhem and murder. This episode and others have raised questions about the character of Blackbeard. Blackbeard may not have been the evil cutthroat of popular imagination. The reality is far more complex. He was a master of psychological warfare and intimidation, a charismatic and dramatic personality, a savvy outlaw and, until the very end, perhaps not even a murderer at all. It appears that coastal North Carolinians may have known this all along, celebrating him as a folk hero who stuck a hot poker in the eye of their imperious British overlord.

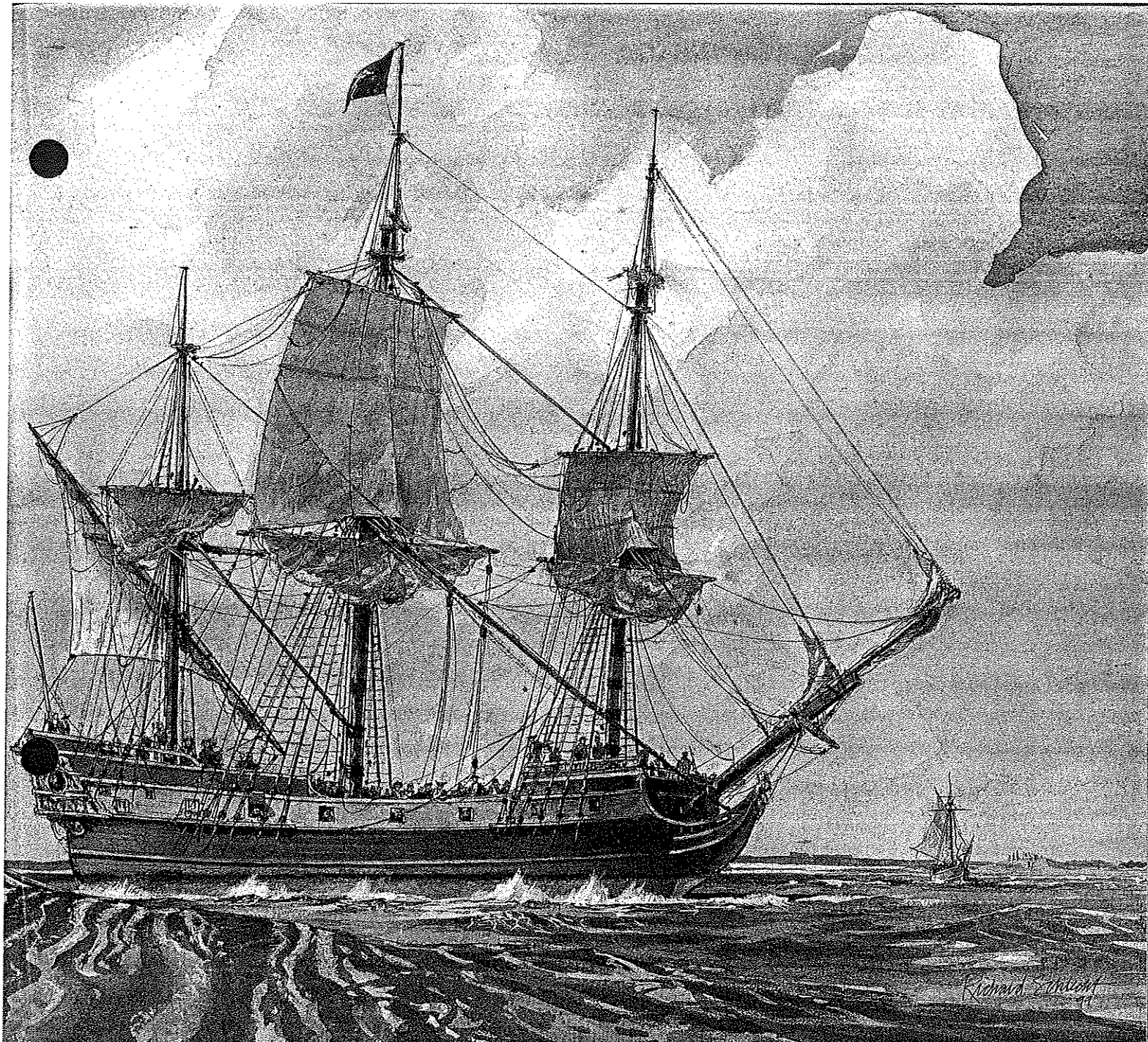
Within a week, the medicine chest is duly delivered and the prisoners are returned, unharmed except for their pride. The pirates strip them of their fancy duds, and they are "sent ashore almost naked," as South Carolina's governor later complains in an indignant letter to London. Teach's flotilla triumphantly weighs anchor and heads north. But within only a week, the *Queen Anne's Revenge* lies aground on a sandbar near the entrance to present-day Beaufort Inlet in North Carolina. And within six months, in Ocracoke Inlet, just south of Cape Hatteras, Teach's severed head hangs unceremoniously from the bowsprit of a sloop commanded by British lieutenant Robert Maynard, sent after him into North Carolina waters by the governor of the colony of Virginia.

Everyone who was anyone knew about the villainous exploits of Blackbeard and his crew, especially the tobacco plantation owners and British colonial operatives around Williamsburg, Virginia, and their rice-growing counterparts in Charles Town to the south. Blackbeard's death must have been welcome news to the British



investors back in Bristol and London, who were fed up with harassment of their extremely lucrative three-point trade: guns, textiles and other relatively cheap goods exchanged in Africa for slaves, who were then sold to the Colonies and the islands of the West Indies for sugar, rum, tobacco, rice and other commodities.

Blackbeard's demise was little celebrated, however, among the sparse, hardscrabble population of white settlers in the watery frontier wedged between Virginia and South Carolina, an area that one day would become the state of North Carolina. Running along its entire coast is a ribbon of barrier islands cut through by squirrely, constantly shifting inlets. With no deepwater port, this was a



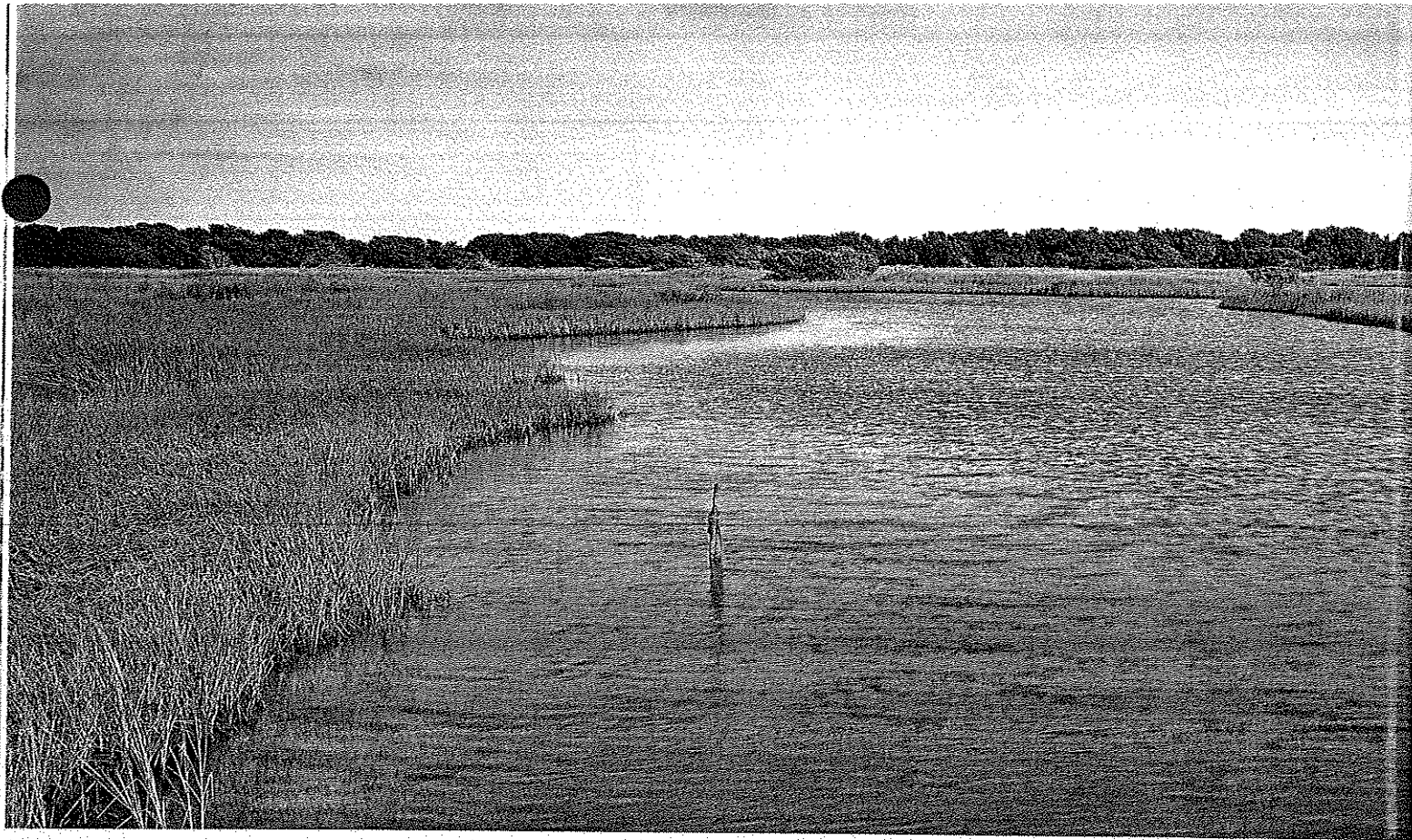
Blackbeard's successes so swelled his ranks that he ran the *Queen Anne's Revenge* aground outside Beaufort Inlet in June 1718.

backwater economy. Most of these folks were fishermen, farmers and, on the barrier islands, shipwreck scavengers. It didn't bother them that the planters of Virginia and South Carolina looked down on them.

As the noose tightened on pirates in the other Colonies, it remained loose in North Carolina. Edward Teach was quite at home behind its barrier islands, slipping behind Ocracoke Island to hole up (navigation charts today still identify this stretch as "Teaches Hole") and crossing shallow Pamlico Sound to Bath, the only town of any size in the area. There, he sold coveted goods at well below the British-tax-inflated prices and hobnobbed with residents, perhaps even the governor himself. According to some

sources, he married a local woman. In short, Edward Teach became entwined with the region's history.

After his death, his reputation continued to grow. In Boston, a teenage Ben Franklin wrote a "sailor's song, on the taking of Teach (or Blackbeard) the pirate," copies of which he hawked in the streets. Letters from Virginia describing the bloody battle at Ocracoke between Maynard and Teach were published in London papers. Just six years later, in 1724, a massive tome entitled *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* was published in London, detailing the exploits of Teach and his contemporaries. Already, fact was overlapped with myth: Blackbeard tucked slow-burning fuses under his hat



Blackbeard found haven in the scrub forests of Springer's Point (inset) and the sinuous waterways surrounding Ocracoke Island.

when approaching mariners at night, giving him the appearance of the devil (possible); Blackbeard had 14 wives (less likely); Blackbeard's headless body swam several times around his sloop at Ocracoke Inlet before sinking (not likely). And what of Blackbeard's legendary flagship?

It now appears that the wreck of the *Queen Anne's Revenge* may be Blackbeard's payback to the slightly off-the-charts colony that gave him shelter. She—or a ship like her—was discovered in shallow water just outside Beaufort Inlet in November 1996 by Mike Daniel, director of field operations for a small outfit called Intersal, Inc., which is devoted to locating and excavating historic shipwrecks. Intersal's president, Phil Masters, had originally intended to search for the remains of a gold-laden Spanish ship, but he knew that Blackbeard's ship was out there because of conversations he had with archaeologist David Moore, an authority on Edward Teach.

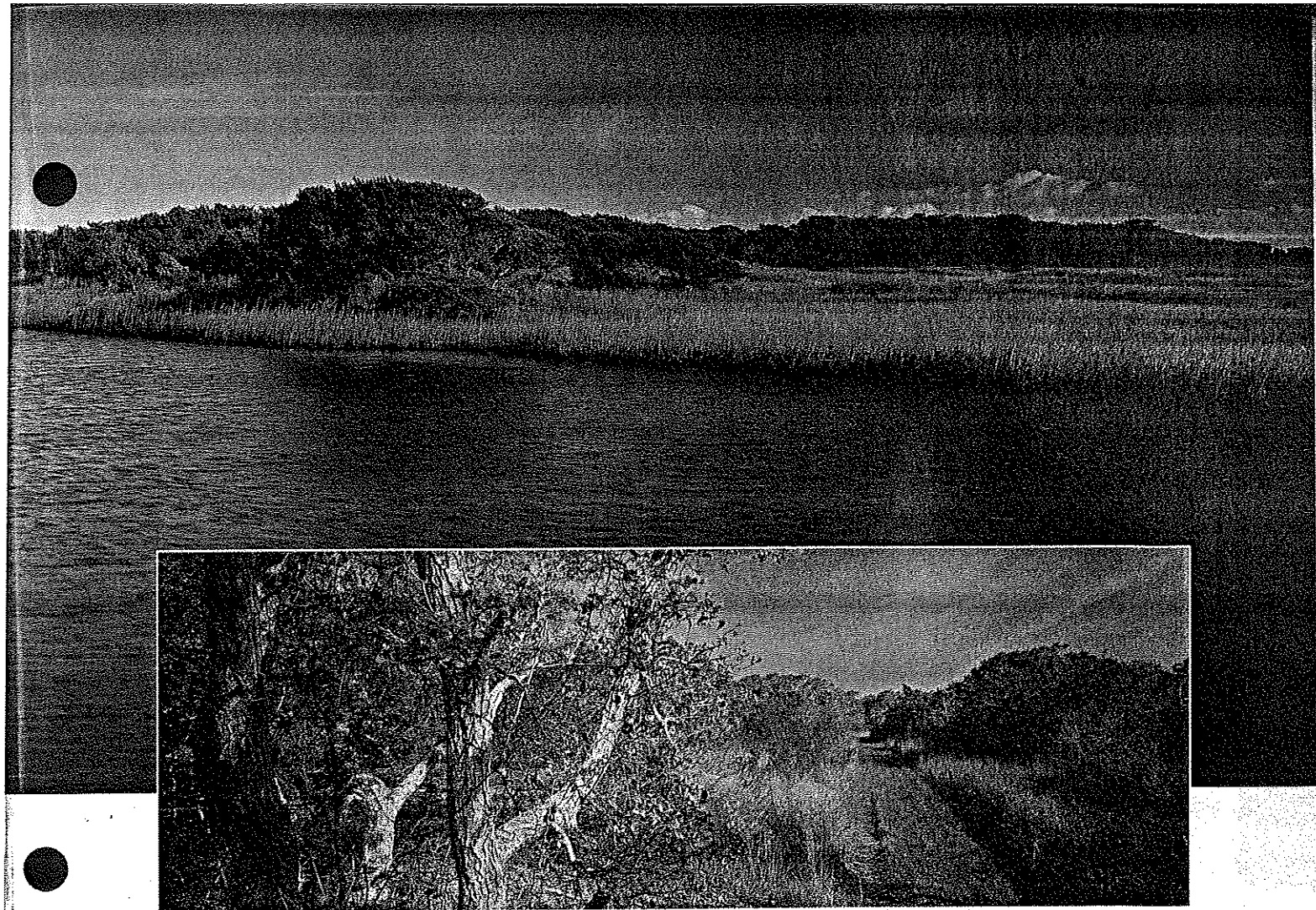
After investigating a 30-by-20-foot pile of ballast stones, barrel hoops and what looked like giant, shell-encrusted pick-up-sticks in 20 feet of water, Daniel called Moore. "Dave," he said, "I'm sitting on a whole lot of cannon; I think I've found your ship."

If there's poetic justice in the world, the discovery of what may be Blackbeard's flagship in the waters of coastal North Carolina is it. It's not a question of treasure. According to eyewitnesses, Teach purposely beached the

ship and stranded some of his crew—in effect, downsizing his cumbersome pirate company—and removed everything of value. The discovery of this wreck would make no one a millionaire. Instead, the wreck would represent a remarkable cultural treasure, a collection of artifacts from the pirate who many in North Carolina regard as an honorary ancestor.

Edward Teach was probably born in Britain. According to the *General History*, he cut his seafaring teeth aboard British privateers out of Jamaica during Queen Anne's War (1702-13). Privateers were just this side of legal; in essence, they had permission from Britain to take French and Spanish ships and keep a percentage of what they found. This arrangement changed in 1713 when the major European powers declared peace, throwing more than a thousand privateers out of work.

So Teach and hundreds of others became outlaws. Teach sailed for a while with his mentor, Benjamin Hornigold. Like other pirates, they followed a snowbird routine. In the spring they'd head north in their small, maneuverable sloops and harass merchant ships, laden with cocoa, cordwood, sugar and rum if they were lucky, along the Delaware Capes or the lower Chesapeake. In the fall, they sailed back south to the islands. Hornigold and Teach were seen in October 1717 off the Delaware Capes; the following month they captured a ship near St. Vincent



in the Caribbean. Teach claimed the ship and renamed her the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. With her, Blackbeard became a wild success, taking some 25 prizes.

For rest and relaxation, Teach headed to Nassau on the island of New Providence in the Bahamas. Because New Providence was a proprietary colony, which meant it was not directly under the king's control, the pirates were not bothered by the law and could enjoy the rum and women in its waterfront taverns. In spring 1718, his bloated flotilla "fished" the old Spanish wrecks off the Bahamas. Then, with the cannon of the *Queen Anne's Revenge* loaded and ready for action, he headed north to Charles Town.

So how certain are archaeologists that the cannon-laden wreck outside Beaufort Inlet is the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, centerpiece of the flotilla that terrorized Charles Town? The cannon provide strong circumstantial evidence. Historical records in France indicate that the *Queen Anne's Revenge* was originally a slave ship out of Nantes named the *Concorde*; she was bound for Martinique when Teach took her. Teach renamed her and added more cannon, bringing her complement to about three dozen. So far, 21 cannon have been located in the wreck; no other 18th-century ship so heavily armed is known to have sunk in Beaufort Inlet.

Although not enough of the hull has been found to determine the size and type of ship, three seasons of lim-

ited trench excavations have yielded other valuable clues. There are pewter plates with the marks of a London manufacturer known to have been active for several decades beginning in 1693. A foot-high bell, possibly plundered from another ship, bears an inscription dating it to 1709. Other items are nearly identical to artifacts recently brought up from the *Whydah*, a slave ship that sank in 1717 off the coast of Cape Cod several weeks after having been taken by the pirate Sam Bellamy. Among them are a pewter syringe, a sea-serpent-shaped side plate for a blunderbuss or musket, and cannon aprons (movable metal plates that covered the touchhole of the loaded cannon).

A team of scientists, most of them college professors from North Carolina and Virginia, are examining everything from the chemical "fingerprints" of the shipwreck's ballast stones (they hope to match them with stones found at ports where Blackbeard's ship stopped) to the contents of the syringe (the scientists found traces of mercury, which was administered into the urethras of the unfortunate victims of venereal diseases—a cure that could itself kill the patient). Although funds are not yet available for full-scale excavation and conservation, there is a growing sense of urgency: the hydrologists believe that for most of its existence the wreck has been buried under sand—protecting it from destructive organisms and strong currents—but large portions of it have lately been uncovered by

some natural events, perhaps the recent series of hurricanes.

While it hasn't been proven definitively—yet—that this wreck is indeed the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, that hasn't held back the town of Beaufort, which last year had a huge portrait of Blackbeard, slow-burning fuses and all, painted on its sky-blue water tower. And it hasn't dampened the enthusiasm of the small army of underwater archaeologists, historians, conservators, scientists, divers, dive-boat captains and volunteers who have been assembled under the umbrella of the QAR Project. At the project's core are the staff members of North Carolina's Underwater Archaeology Unit, or UAU. This crew of a half-dozen resourceful people (all of them divers, from the office manager to the director) are experienced hands, since they're responsible for documenting and protecting the state's 5,000 historically recorded shipwrecks.

But this wreck is over the top—even if it isn't Blackbeard's ship, it's still the oldest shipwreck ever investigated in the state. Inside the QAR headquarters, a former scallop-processing plant around the bend from the idyllic Beaufort waterfront, two cannon, hooked up to Sears battery chargers, recline in their own tubs of water like patients on life support. They're undergoing a five-year-long electrolytic bath to free them of salts. Nearby shelves brim with smaller objects: pewter plates, one of them with a hole that looks suspiciously like a bullet hole; plastic bags filled with ballast stones; a set of brass dividers, cleaned up by the conservators, that Teach himself may have held in his hands. Hundreds of objects, many in their own little baths, fill another UAU conservation lab near Wilmington, North Carolina.

Not surprisingly, the QAR team has recently been conducting magnetometer surveys at the wreck site—searching for more cannon and other ferrous objects buried in the sand—rather than bringing up more artifacts. The site is 20 minutes away by boat. That's ten scenic minutes in protected water—past the large shrimpers tied up along the wharf, and the low rooftops of Beaufort—and ten minutes of rock-and-roll through the inlet itself, that geographic hourglass where the shallow but expansive back bay

shakes hands with the ocean through a narrow opening.

North Carolina's barrier islands are only several hundred yards wide in places, and the inlets that cut through them enable careful boaters to go back and forth between the ocean and the sheltered back bays, which lie between the barrier islands and the mainland. This broken ribbon of sand, called the Outer Banks, reaches down from the Virginia line, far out to sea at Cape Hatteras, with its deadly offshore shoals, and then arcs southwest back to Cape Lookout; Ocracoke Island is along this stretch. Another arc of sand, where Beaufort Inlet is found, follows more closely along the coast from Cape Lookout southwest to Cape Fear. Throw in tides, wind and a shifting geography, and it's no wonder pirates came here. North Carolina's barrier islands are equivalent to the labyrinthine slot

canyons of the Southwest into which a different sort of outlaw often holed up.

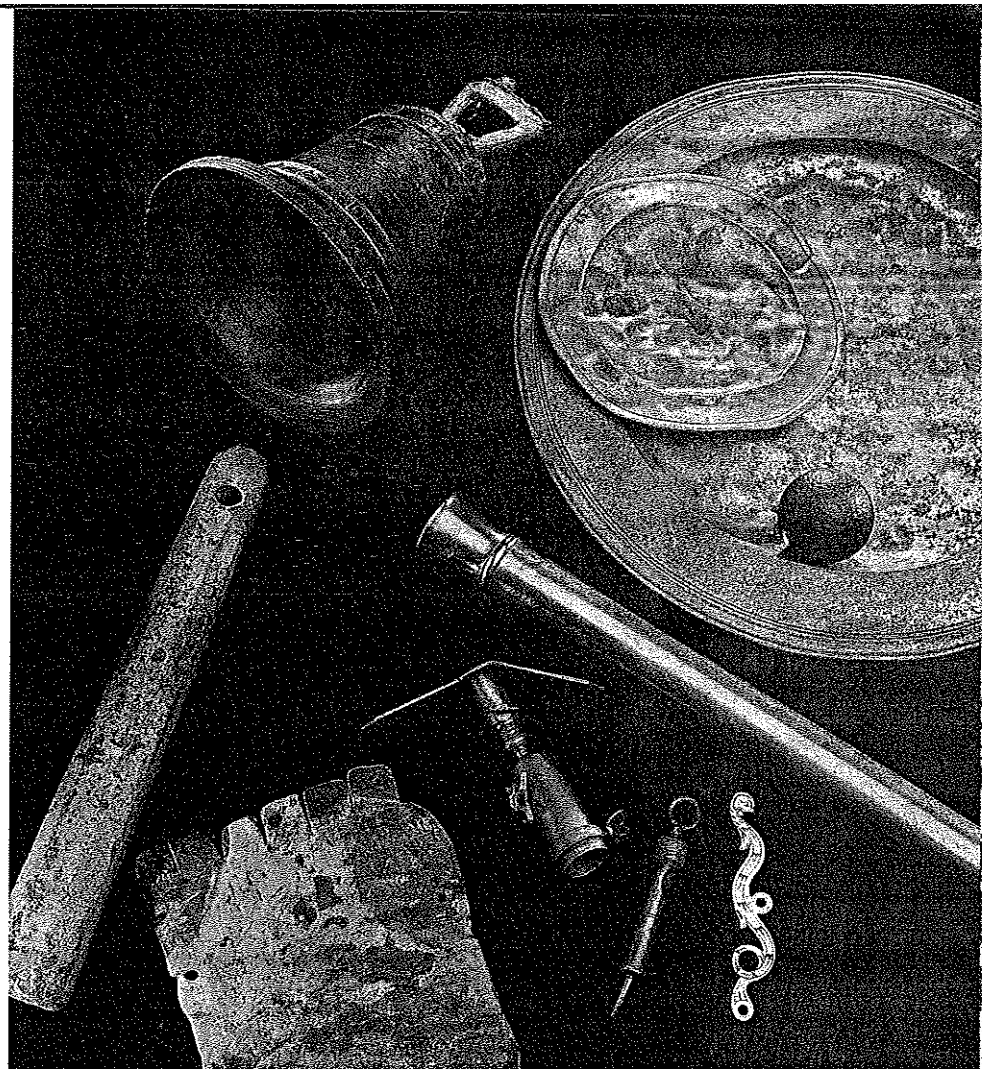
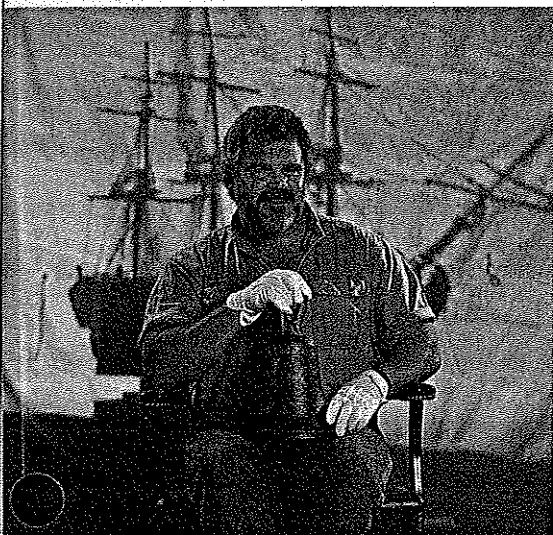
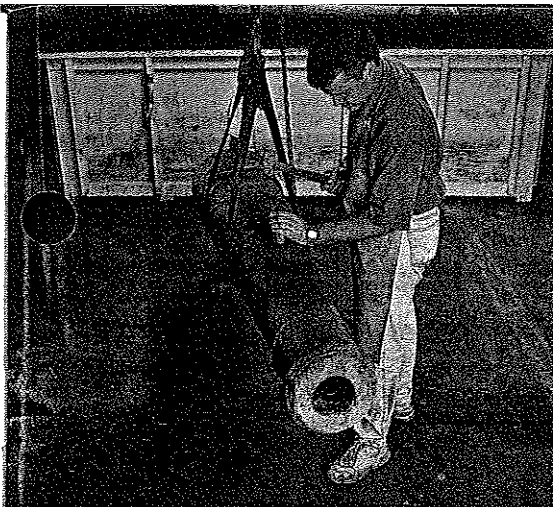
Getting through any of the inlets, including Beaufort Inlet, can be quite a ride. Julep Gillman-Bryan, captain of the UAU's 24-foot dive boat, the *Snap Dragon*, routinely has to wedge herself in, feet hard against the bulkhead, backside pressed against the seat, as the boat climbs and falls with a shudder through five-foot swells. Imagining pirates negotiating this

hostile environment with no engine, hundreds of yards of sailcloth and a 200-ton vessel gives one an appreciation for their seamanship.

For the better part of a week in June, the *Snap Dragon* is one of four dive boats that make this run as the magnetometer surveys get under way. On the days when the water at the site isn't too rough, the boats tie up at moorings and the divers get to work. In the hazy distance to the north, Blackbeard watches from the water tower, the tallest landmark on the low-lying shoreline. Some divers collect ballast stones, others sketch. David Moore, coordinator of the maritime archaeology program at the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort, is on loan to the QAR Project. He will spend the day underwater in front of a tangle of ship's rigging, drawing a detail of it. A big bear of a man, he holds a waterproof sketching slate against his



Members of North Carolina's Underwater Archaeology Unit pull a cannon from what may be the long-lost wreck of Blackbeard's flagship.



Booty from the wreck: archaeologist David Moore displays the ship's bell; Wayne Lusardi preps a recovered cannon; (clockwise) bell, pewter plates, cannon ball, blunderbuss barrel, sidepiece decoration, syringe, pivot mount, cannon apron, sounding weight.

chest as he gently falls backward off the boat with a splash.

In the water, two divers with a magnetometer sensor are swimming in a grid over the shipwreck, stopping every two-and-a-half feet to record a reading. The sensor, which resembles a stainless steel pipe duct-taped to an upside-down PVC patio table, will yield more than 200 readings over the site, which will later be crunched on the computer. These readings may yield the location of more cannon. During the next excavation session, in October, they'll survey a larger area, hoping to find more buried cannon; or, even better, a ship's bell bearing the name "Concorde." The team members are confident that they'll find the proof they are seeking.

As the divers continue to piece together the shipwreck puzzle, the historians have been doing the same thing with the historical record. One of the divers on the QAR team—also a Tarheel—is retired historian Lindley Butler. "What's great about this shipwreck and that of the *Whydah* is that they're a dose of reality amid all the myth," Butler says. "Everybody has the image of pirates from the Errol Flynn movies, but Teach and the other pirates of this era didn't want to fire the cannon. They tried to avoid sea battles. Teach did all he could to intimidate—he culti-

vated his image, and in the end, it did him in." Typically, in taking a ship, he would fire a cannon across the bow of the intended prize—a warning shot—and then hoist the flag. Usually that was enough. One look at the dreaded Blackbeard, his rough-and-ready crew, cannon poking out from every port, and the black flag running up the mast could scare even the most courageous merchant captain into immediate submission. Those fools who did resist drew more cannon fire, as well as hand grenades fashioned from bottles filled with powder, shot and lead.

A couple of warning shots, a hoisted flag, a lot of shouting and, finally, surrender, says Moore, is basically how Teach took the *Concorde*. We know this because in 1719 the captain of the *Concorde* returned to France and gave a detailed report about the engagement. He also said that Teach had given him a sloop so he could reload his cargo of slaves and continue on his journey.

As with the hostages in Charles Town Harbor, it was not so bad an encounter that the captain didn't live to tell about it. Which brings up the character issue. Butler, Moore and other historians from North Carolina have a take on Blackbeard that's quite different from the one shaped back then by, well, Teach himself and the British.



Beaufort Inlet and other breaks between North Carolina's barrier islands gave Blackbeard access to shallow and protected back bays.

Teach's motive: the worse he looked, the better it was for business. The British motive: the worse the pirates looked, the more they could justify hanging them. The North Carolinians have their own collective memory of Blackbeard—and for all the evil things that were said about him, they recall a kinder, gentler pirate. Drawing on local legend, for instance, North Carolina former law professor Robert E. Lee wrote of Teach's dealings with women that "few pirates treated women or girls with greater respect. . . . He would not let a girl serve him a drink; he preferred to serve the drink to the girl." This is a far cry from the story that circulated in Teach's time, and was repeated for posterity in the *General History*—that Teach prostituted his wife in North Carolina to the other members of his crew.

In search of the real Teach, Moore has gone through all the available historical records. Although they often contradict each other—everybody had an agenda—there are surprisingly many of them. In addition to the *General History*, they include trial testimony of captured pirates who sailed with Blackbeard; eyewitness accounts of captains whose ships he captured; letters written to London by exasperated British officials; and logs of British patrol ships sailing out of Virginia.

A surprising discovery concerns a rip-roaring battle, chronicled by the *General History*, in which Teach supposedly routed a 28-gun British ship, the *Scarborough*, shortly after acquiring the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. The battle seems never to have occurred. Moore went through the ship's log in the British Public Record Office and found no mention of this incident. Even more surprising is another Moore observation: "Blackbeard cultivated a 'demon from hell' look, but we have found no evidence that he killed a man until the battle with Lieutenant Maynard."

This "demon from hell" look is well detailed in the *Gen-*

eral History. Its description, some of which is corroborated by eyewitness accounts of the time, outdoes anything that Hollywood could invent: "... our Heroe, Captain Teach, assumed the Cognomen of Black-beard, from that large Quantity of Hair, which, like a frightful Meteor, covered his whole Face. . . . This Beard was black, which he suffered to grow of an extravagant Length . . . he was accustomed to twist it with Ribbons, in small Tails . . . and turn them about his Ears: In Time of Action, he wore a Sling over his Shoulders, with three Brace of Pistols, hanging in Holsters like Bandaliers; and stuck lighted Matches under his Hat, which appearing on each Side of his Face, his Eyes naturally looking fierce and wild, made him altogether such a Figure, that Imagination cannot form an Idea of a Fury, from Hell, to look more frightful." That, and 40 cannon, would be pretty intimidating.

While he provoked feelings of fear and terror among the ships' crews he encountered, he was greeted with a different sort of emotion across the Atlantic. "Not only were the pirates taking property," says Lindley Butler; "they were an affront to the hierarchical, class-based social structure in Britain. I think that burned them back in England as much as the property taking." Butler is referring to the way the pirates organized themselves, which was radical for its time. They elected their captain, quartermaster and other ship's officers; conducted "general consultations" on itinerary and strategy (such as the meeting held aboard the *Queen Anne's Revenge* in Charles Town Harbor), in which all members of the crew voted; worked out an equitable division of prizes (for example, one share for all but the captain, who got two). This pirate code was written up in articles that each crew member signed upon joining the company. In the articles of pirate Bartholomew Roberts' crew, for example, every detail of shipboard life was cov-



Beneath the raised sword of a British sailor, the pirate captain battles for his life in Howard Pyle's *Blackbeard's Last Fight*.

ered; there were provisions for the settlement of disputes ("No striking one another on board, but every man's quarrels to be ended on shore, at sword and pistol"); for gambling ("No person to game at cards or dice for money"); for wounds suffered in battle ("If . . . any man should lose a limb, or become a cripple . . . he was to have 800 dollars"). "Unlike the Royal Navy, the merchant navy, or indeed any other institutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," notes British historian David Cordingly in his book *Under the Black Flag*, "the pirate communities were . . . democracies."

Yet another affront to the British may have been that some pirate ships, perhaps including Teach's, included blacks as members of the company. During the battle at Ocracoke Inlet, Teach told a man named Caesar, one of several blacks on board, that if it looked like Maynard was going to win, he should torch the sloop. It is unlikely, say Butler and Moore, that Teach would have given that task to anyone but a full crew member.

Fifteen pirates were rounded up and taken by Lieutenant Maynard to Williamsburg, Virginia, and tried, but unfortunately the trial transcript was lost, most probably during the Civil War. It is known, however, that in Williamsburg the decision had to be made whether to treat the five black defendants as slaves or to try them as pirates.

Pirates it was. In the end, 13 men were convicted and hung.

Of course, Teach himself didn't survive to be tried; he died on the windless early morning of November 21, 1718, after Maynard's two sloops slipped into Ocracoke Inlet, where Teach and his crew were bleary-eyed from a night of carousing. If, indeed, Teach never killed a man prior to this battle—an intriguing thought, although it will never be known for sure—he made up for it here.

Teach had roughly 20 men; Maynard had three times that. But while Maynard had only small arms, cutlasses and pistols, Teach had nine mounted guns on his sloop, the *Adventure*. When Teach and his crew headed the *Adventure* into a winding channel, Maynard's sloops ran aground. As Maynard's men worked frantically to free them, Teach's voice bellowed across the water. "At our first salutation," Maynard later reported, "he drank Damnation to me and my Men, whom he stil'd Cowardly Puppies." Once afloat, Maynard's sloops moved toward the *Adventure*. Maynard was no fool; when Teach's crew fired a broadside of nails and iron scraps from the mounted guns, Maynard had his men hide below to trick him, causing Teach to believe they'd been killed. Then, when Teach's crew pulled alongside and boarded, Maynard's men stormed the deck.

Teach and Maynard engaged in brutal face-to-face combat, swinging their swords as men dropped around them, coating the deck with blood. Maynard's sword bent upon hitting Teach's cartridge box; the lieutenant then shot Teach with his pistol. But the tall pirate captain kept fighting. At this point, as reported in the *Boston News Letter* in 1719, in the most complete account of the battle, one of Maynard's men jumped in to assist, slashing Teach's neck with his sword. "Well done, lad," Teach said to him. With that, Maynard's man swung the sword through Teach's neck, cutting off his head. When Blackbeard fell, he had five gunshots and 20 cuts in his body. Some 20 lay dead.

"Here was an End of that courageous Brute, who might have pass'd in the World for a Heroe, had he been employ'd in a good Cause," says the *General History*. "His Destruction, which was of such Consequence to the Plantations, was entirely owing to the Conduct and Bravery of Lieutenant Maynard and his Men." Well, they're not so sure about that in North Carolina's low country; back then, the fortunes of Britain's plantations meant nothing to them. And today, aboard boats passing by a certain shipwreck just outside Beaufort Inlet, more than one bottle of rum has been raised in a toast of damnation to that cowardly puppy Lieut. Robert Maynard.

Contributing editor Constance Bond wrote in 1998 about Vincent van Gogh, posters, and photographs from the gold rush.