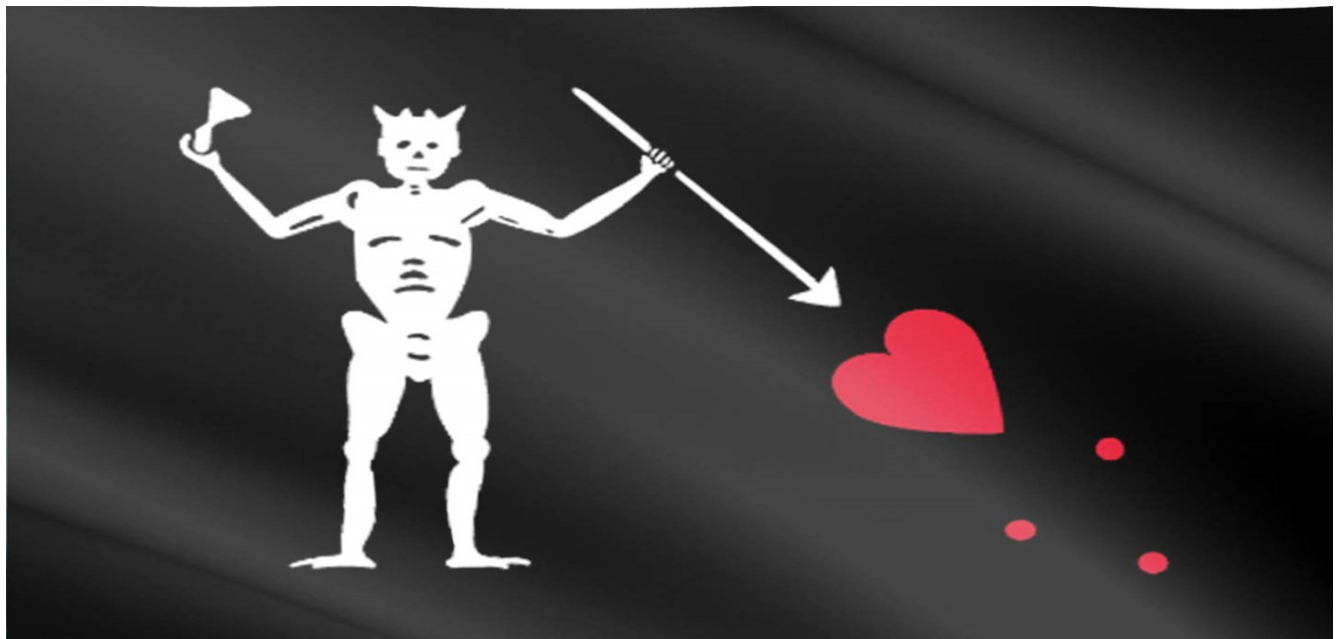# PIRATES AND LOST TREASURE OF TOPSAIL ISLAND

Image: Campuchia/Shutterstock

"If ye be brave or fool enough to face a pirate's curse, proceed." — Davy Jones

You've probably watched the Disney film series, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. You may have heard the chilling stories of the sea raiders who terrorized the coasts of North Carolina in their times. Are those lores true? Yes, at least some of it is! Topsail Island shares a very important part in the Golden Age of Piracy. Folklore has it that Topsail Island was so named for the pirate ships that hid behind the island with their topsails visible from the sea. Some believe it's a fable and that the name in fact came from New Topsail Inlet. Which story is true, we do not know. We do know, however, that you're about to take a smooth ferry ride through Topsail Pirate History.

In the 17th century, England and Spain were at war and Queen Anne of England had hired pirates or "privateers" to attack and loot Spanish ships. But, after the war, she laid them off, leaving most of the "lot of Privateers" unemployed. These pirates, however, saw an opportunity for themselves in the business of self-privateering. The sea traffic in those days was so heavy that there was hardly any need for the pirates to set sail to search for their prey. Instead, they would steer their ships through the shallow inlets of present-day Topsail Island and hide in the channels between the island and the mainland, then they would quietly watch the sea lanes off of our shores for other ships. Eventually, the merchants became aware of their tricks and hiding places, so they began scanning the dunes for the "top of the sails" of the pirate ships. When the pirates sighted an unlucky victim (merchant ships loaded with gold, silver, spices, and supplies), the hot chase began and once they caught up with the merchants, they did what they knew best to do: pillage, plunder, rifle and loot!

If you stand in front of the Sea Vista Motel on the sand, looking out to sea….you can almost hear the thunder of the cannons and the screams of Piracy. It all happened…. right there in front of you.

The Pirate "Blackbeards" Flag. He was not a nice person

Topsail's history tells us of famed Pirates like Stede Bonnet and Charles Vane, but the most notorious of them was Blackbeard, also known as Edward Teach. The very mention of his name left many with the hairs on their skin standing upright. He was feared across the seas from Barbados to New York. He was known as the cruelest pirate and a master of psychological warfare. He often used his fearful appearance to terrorize and manipulate his opponents — he was over six feet tall with long beaded beards in which he tied cannon fuses and sulfur matches that he would light up before torturing his victims. This gave them the image of an evil creature; a giant with his beards on fire and smoke emanating from his head. He always had three pistols strapped to his chest with a sling, and a cutlass strapped to his hip. He was known to show no fear and give no 'quarter' (mercy). Aren't you glad you weren't on the earth in that era?!

Blackbeard a.k.a Edward Teach

The terror and life of Blackbeard ended when he encountered Lieutenant Robert Maynard of the Royal Navy in Ocracoke (His vessel, *The Queen Anne's Revenge* (a French Ship formerly called *La Concorde* which he stole and renamed), went aground in 1718 just offshore from the Beaufort (Not that far to the North of Topsail). A few months later, Lieutenant Maynard and the Royal Navy came upon them. It is said that Blackbeard took a glass of Liquor and drank to Lt. Maynard with these words: "Damnation seize my soul if I give you quarters or take any from you" and Mr. Maynard responded boldly to him, that he expected no quarters from him, nor should he give him any. The battle was brutal and left many dead with the sea tinged with blood. Alas, it ended badly for Blackbeard even though he fought with much valor — despite receiving several shots and lethal wounds to his body, he stood his ground and fought on till his body dropped, lifeless. The men thatremained on Blackbeard's fleet were attacked, though some begged for 'quarters' to grant them a few more days to live. The Lieutenant caused Blackbeard to be decapitated and he had his head hung at the bowsprit of Maynard's ship for all to see that the mighty Blackbeard had fallen. Maynard then sailed to Bath Town, to get relief for his wounded men. The wreck from the battle was found in 1996 by Intersal Inc., private salvagers based in Palm Bay, Florida. The remains of *The Queen Anne's Revenge* are now the property of the North Carolinians.

Blackbeard and Lt. Maynard, painting by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (c. 1863–1930)

Blackbeard was gone but the secret of his treasure's location died with him. Maynard rummaged Blackbeard's ship for hints of this treasure but found only supplies and letters. Captain Charles Johnson in his book, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*, accounted that the night before Blackbeard was killed, one of his men asked him as they drank, whether his wife knew where he had buried his treasure. He answered that only himself "and the devil, knew where it was, and the longest liver would take it all".
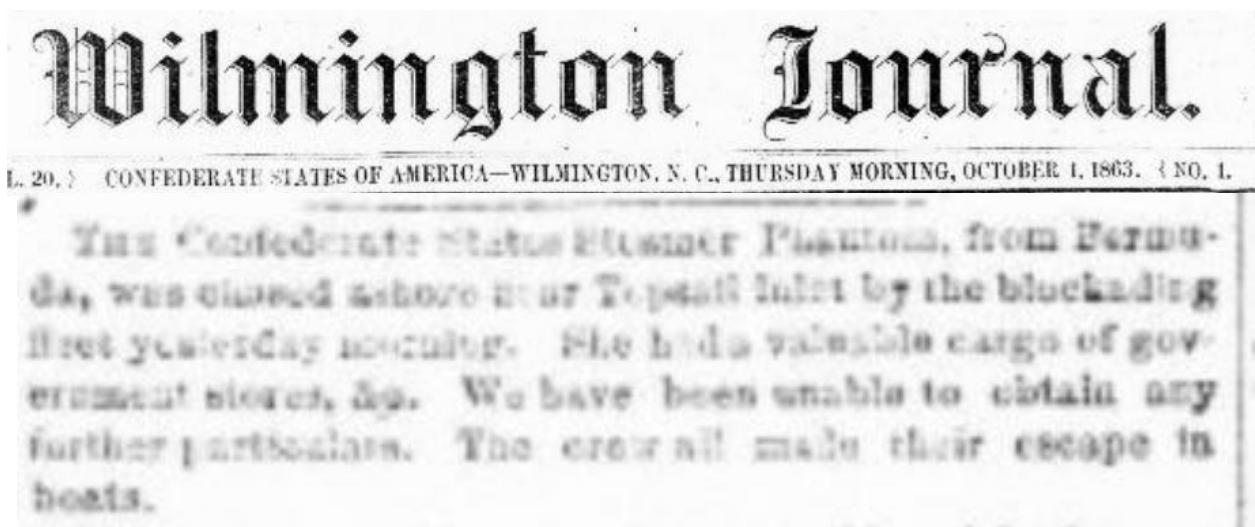
Legend says that Blackbeard visited our shores of Topsail often and even gifted this island his treasure! There is a supposed bottomless hole in the town of Topsail Beach which the locals call the "Gold Hole". In the mid-1900s, a team of treasure hunters speculated that, the "Gold Hole" was the hiding place for Blackbeard's treasure. They spent several years (1937-1941) searching for his treasure in the hole to purportedly no avail. They suddenly disappeared one morning without a trace…they found the treasure? It was never found? Who knows!

Of course, for all we know…the treasure could be sitting just underneath that blue house's front porch that you just drove by on the left. No-one knows where it is now…I mean, do they?

There are legends of Ghost Ships from the Golden Age of Piracy along our shores. At the southern end of Topsail Island, there is a barren island called "Lea Island". Many say that if you are sailing with your radar on, just as you pass Rich's Inlet, Lea Island's southern inlet, you may notice a "blip" on your radar screen sitting just inside the inlet. When you look back, you would see nothing, but as you cruise by, the "blip" will begin to move slowly out towards the inlet, coming into the ocean just behind you and then rapidly begins to track behind you before suddenly disappearing off the radar. It is just as Blackbeard did over 300 years ago! A local history buff, Chris Rackley, attests to seeing this Ghost Ship on his radar as a child even in broad daylight. Is it an

anomaly or Blackbeard's ghost ship, Queens Anne's Revenge? Who knows!

During the American Civil war (April 12, 1861 – May 26, 1865), many boats, ships, battleships, and blockade runners were wrecked and sunk along our coast! Many of these shipwrecks are scattered off our Topsail Island's sandy shores. The CSS Phantom was a 500 tonne, 170 horsepower blockade runner, built in Liverpool, England whose wreck is said to have been found just off the coast of Topsail Island, in the New Topsail Inlet. The Phantom was designed in 1862 to transport cargo from Bermuda to the CSA's Ordinance Bureau. She made two successful trips between Bermuda and Wilmington, but on her third journey in 1863, she made her last stop. On her way to Wilmington from Bermuda, the USS Connecticut sighted her and chased her to the shores near New Topsail Inlet...just a couple hundred yards south of "Serenity Point" (as it is called today). To prevent the enemy ship from accessing her "valuable cargo", the Phantom crew scuttled the ship and escaped in lifeboats. The vessel's fate was recorded in The Wilmington Journal on Thursday, Oct. 1, 1863. It is speculated that the 'valuable cargo' contained gold worth at least $2.4 million. So far, efforts to find the Phantom treasure have been unsuccessful. If you are a dauntless diver and a sucker for adventure, here are the wreck coordinates in the New Topsail Inlet: North Latitude 34° 22′ 23″, West Longitude 77° 39′ 29″.

An extremely weathered copy of the Wilmington Journal.
(Port City Daily photo / COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

Whether the Ghost Ships or the treasures are real is up to you on what to believe…, but as the renowned Captain Jack Sparrow once said, "Not all treasure is silver and gold, mate." If you are up for casual treasure hunting, you can make a hobby of beach combing for shark teeth and seashells. Topsail Island offers great shelling spots since it is a barrier island, so grab a bucket if you may. For a real hunting experience, it is true that Seashells may not cut it, but for a fun adventure, they are still worth it, plus it is a much safer hobby than "Pirating!" Me Mateys!