

Carolina's Inner Sanctum

By Willie Drye

For the *Tampa Tribune*

October 15, 2006

It's a Friday lunch hour in downtown Hertford, North Carolina. A decision at Woodard's Drugstore to increase the price of ice cream cones from 50 cents to 60 cents has stirred some discussion among the regulars, but there's still a line of customers at the soda fountain ready to order the cones, as well as tuna salad and BLT sandwiches and \$2 chocolate milkshakes.

Out on the sidewalk, the headlines of a troubled world are visible from newspaper racks selling the big-city *Raleigh News and Observer*, but it seems pointless to pay attention to those ceaseless and intractable problems at the moment. There are benches inviting you to sit down and enjoy your shake or cone and watch the traffic and pedestrians on Church Street.

Friends call each other by first names and stop to chat, their accents carrying hints of their Southern and colonial English heritage. Dogs eagerly take in all the sights, scents and sounds from the beds of passing pickup trucks. Cats doze in the display windows of an antique shop and nearby bookstore, and pictures of the late Jim "Catfish" Hunter, a Hertford native and member of baseball's Hall of Fame, are visible in every third or fourth storefront.

Church Street is only a couple of blocks from the broad Perquimans River, a tributary of the Albemarle Sound. Although Hertford retains its unmistakable North Carolina flavor, it's been discovered. Some of its 19th century houses have been bought and restored by newcomers, and pricy sailboats are tied up at docks jutting into the Perquimans.

Hertford is only one of many waterfront towns in eastern North Carolina where a growing number of visitors find pleasant vignettes of small-town Americana. For years, tourists only glimpsed these sleepy little towns as they hurried past en route to somewhere else, usually the better-known and more stylish Outer Banks.

And when tourists did stop for gasoline or a hamburger, some locals might refer to them as "dingbatters" – a traditional eastern North Carolina name for outsiders.

But things are changing dramatically, and these small towns have learned a few marketing tricks from their upscale, sophisticated neighbors to the east on North Carolina's barrier islands. A few years ago, tourism development groups in the historic towns on the state's rivers and sounds realized they lived in the middle of three hot tourism commodities – history, a largely unspoiled natural environment, and lots of water. So they created a marketing concept known as the Inner Banks.

Now, once somnolent downtowns are reawakening. Visitors are strolling along waterfronts in such little towns as Plymouth, Bath, Elizabeth City, Belhaven, Columbia, Washington and others. They're discovering the region's rich maritime history in large and small museums scattered throughout the region. They're enjoying the unpretentious charm of the residents. They're putting fishing boats, canoes and kayaks into the water to explore the natural beauty of the region's rivers and sounds.

And most importantly, in an area that's long been among the poorest in the state, they're spending money.

"We're fascinated by water," says Harry Thompson, an author and curator of the Port o' Plymouth Civil War museum in downtown Plymouth. "Everybody in the world wants to be near

the water, so being around (the Albemarle Sound) the biggest freshwater body of water in the U.S. is a tremendous asset.”

Visitors who launch canoes and kayaks near Plymouth can see unspoiled nature that looks much the same as when the first European visitors came to the area around 1584. That’s when English explorers Ralph Lane and John White ventured into the region’s inland waters looking for a spot to plant their first settlement in the New World.

The 16th century English settlers on Roanoke Island vanished into the mists of time and became the famous “Lost Colony.” But later settlers who came in the 17th and early 18th centuries founded the little waterfront towns that became North Carolina’s first municipalities.

“My ancestors came here 10 generations ago out of Sterling, Scotland,” Thompson says. “They never went anywhere else. They stayed right here.”

Behind Thompson’s homespun folksiness and self-effacement is an intellect that earned him a degree in zoology at Duke University. He has written several books about the nearly constant fighting in northeastern North Carolina during the Civil War and is a walking encyclopedia of the region’s history.

Thompson notes that the first Inner Banks residents had better sense than to settle on the hurricane-vulnerable Outer Banks, much of which is now lined with oceanfront mansions.

“The barrier islands protect us from bad ocean storms,” Thompson says. “The old-timey people weren’t stupid. They got off their boats and came to this section.

“People shied away from the Outer Banks unless they were fishermen or tradesmen who depended on the sea for their livelihoods.”

Until the last 50 years or so, the Outer Banks were largely undeveloped except for a few small, scattered villages. But that’s changed dramatically. Now, Thompson wryly notes, “Rain can’t even touch the ground for miles and miles” in some places on the islands.

And real estate prices on the Banks have soared to the point that they’re also nearly untouchable for most people. Now, people are finding more affordable waterfront vistas on the Inner Banks.

Jim McKelvey, who owns Wine & Words café and bookstore in downtown Belhaven, says people looking for real estate come into his store every weekend.

McKelvey, who grew up in a Chicago suburb, has been in North Carolina since 1980. He worked in Raleigh and discovered Belhaven during a business trip to nearby Washington. He was charmed by the little town on the Pungo River, and decided to buy property there.

“Belhaven was as far east as I wanted to go,” McKelvey says. “I’ve never been much interested in the beach.”

Eventually, he and his wife, Yvonne Sedgwick, opened their shop in a 1905-vintage building that had once housed a downtown grocery store. Now, it’s a stopping place for boaters traveling the Intracoastal Waterway. And McKelvey and Sedgwick have earned credibility among the locals for creating their own versions of local food favorites such as pimento cheese sandwich spread and crab cakes made with fresh crab from local fishermen.

Soon, new condominiums overlooking the Pungo in downtown Belhaven are going to open.

Signs of more new development are abundant elsewhere in the region. Developer Andres Duany of Miami is building a new project called Sandy Point on the Albemarle Sound near Edenton. Sandy Point is expected to bring thousands of new residents to the Inner Banks. Although it will be an upscale development, it will try to capture the small town charm of Hertford and other Inner Banks towns.

Sandy Point planners were attracted to the Inner Banks because the area had changed so little in the previous 50 years.

Thompson, the Plymouth museum curator, notes that thousands of acres in neighboring counties also have been sold for development. He's amazed at the plans one developer has for his property.

"He's going to advertise it up north as waterfront property – on the side of that cotton-picking swamp, and the creek," Thompson says, shaking his head. "But somebody will come down here and buy it."

The expected flood of newcomers to the Inner Banks has locals searching for ways to handle the double-edged sword of growth. The infusion of badly needed cash will be a boon for local governments that have long had to make do with modest tax bases.

But the new residents also are probably going to cause changes in the region's character, and that could create tension between newcomers and old-timers. Some natives may leave because they can't cope with the changes or can't afford the inevitable increase in property taxes and living costs that will come with the new development.

"It's bad to see people have to give up their heritage and move," Thompson says. "The one who gets it in the neck is the average old guy, retired from a low-paying job, living on a fixed income. This is what's so bad. These are innocent bystanders."

Still, Thompson and others acknowledge that the changes are inevitable and desirable. While some people may be alienated, others will become leaders who shape the region's future.

"It cannot stay with the status quo," Thompson says. "Nature doesn't allow it. You're going to grow and change or you're going to get wiped out. That's just nature's way of doing things."

Information about touring the Inner Banks is available from the Foundation of Renewal for Eastern North Carolina, 252/756-0176

Bath

Waterfront: Pamlico River

Founded: 1705

History: Bath is North Carolina's first incorporated town and was the site of the first meetings of the colony's General Assembly. Bath's importance diminished, however, when the town of Washington was founded nearby.

Accessible by: U.S. Highway 17

It might surprise you to know: Bath was the last home of the infamous pirate known as Blackbeard, whose real name is thought to be Edward Teach. Blackbeard became quite popular with Bath residents by spending freely in the town. The pirate was killed in a battle with the English navy in 1718.

Novelist Edna Ferber visited bath in 1925 and was fascinated by the *James Adams Floating Theater*, which was docked in Bath. She based her novel, *Showboat*, on this visit.

If you visit: The Historic Bath Visitors Center, operated by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, offers exhibits about Bath's long history, and has a small gift shop as well.

Columbia

Waterfront: On the Scuppernong River, near the Albemarle Sound

Founded: Chartered by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1793 as Elizabeth Town.

History: Elizabeth Town became the county seat of Tyrell County in 1799. In 1810, the name was changed to Columbia to avoid confusion with nearby Elizabeth City.

Accessible by: U.S. Highway 64

If you visit: The Walter Jones Center for the Sounds overlooks the Scuppernong River and offers displays about the region's wildlife and natural features. Visitors can get an up-close look at a coastal swamp from a boardwalk that winds through nearby wetlands.

Hertford

Waterfront: On the Perquimans River, near the Albemarle Sound

Founded: Settled in 1669 as Phelps Point.

History: The first religious service on record in North Carolina took place in May 1672 in the town that would become Hertford. Hertford was chartered in 1758. In 1792, Sarah DeCrow was appointed postmaster of Hertford, becoming the first woman to hold the position.

Accessible by: U.S. Highway 17

It might surprise you to know: Songwriter Benny Davis wrote the standard "Carolina Moon" after seeing the moon over the Perquimans River. The river got its name from a Yeopim Indian word meaning "land of beautiful women."

If you visit: Hertford's busy little downtown business district offers antique and specialty shops, restaurants and a bookstore. The nearby Newbold-White House, built by Abraham Sanders in 1726, is the oldest surviving brick building in North Carolina.

Edenton

Waterfront: On the Albemarle Sound

Founded: 1715

History: Incorporated as “The Towne on Queen Anne’s Creek, renamed Edenton in 1722 in honor of North Carolina’s colonial governor, Charles Eden.

Accessible by: NC Highway 32 and NC Highway 37

It might surprise you to know: During the Civil War, many of the small towns in northeastern North Carolina were burned by federal troops during the nearly continual fighting between Confederate and Union troops from 1862 to 1865. But Edenton somehow escaped this fate.

A popular – but probably untrue – story about how the town avoided being torched says that Edenton leaders had a Confederate flag and a Union Flag. When Confederate forces dominated the region, so the story goes, the town flew the Confederate Stars and Bars. But when fortunes shifted and Union forces were in control, the Stars and Stripes was hoisted from the flagpole.

If you visit: Edenton has a small but thriving downtown featuring a movie theater, restaurants, and a coffee shop. Baseball fans can visit historic Hicks Field to watch the Edenton Steamers take on other teams in the Coastal Plain League. The teams are composed of college players from across the U.S. and play from June to August.

Elizabeth City

Waterfront: On the Pasquotank River, near the Albemarle Sound

Founded: 1793

History: The town began to grow after the Dismal Swamp Canal opened in 1805. The Pasquotank River connected with the canal, which was dug by slave labor through the swamp and across the North Carolina-Virginia border to link with the Elizabeth River near Norfolk.

Accessible by: U.S. Highway 17

It might surprise you to know: Wilbur Wright came to Elizabeth City in September 1900 looking for a boat owner to take him across the Albemarle Sound to Kill Devil Hills on the Outer Banks. For several years, Elizabeth City became a stopover for the Wright Brothers while they were experimenting with their flying machine on the Outer Banks.

If you visit: The recently opened Museum of the Albemarle, overlooking the Pasquotank River in downtown Elizabeth City, tells the long and colorful story of the Albemarle Sound region.

Plymouth

Waterfront: On the Roanoke River, just upstream from the Albemarle Sound.

Founded: Settled in 1747 as Plymouth Landing.

History: Town laid out in 1787, incorporated 1790. In the early 19th century, Plymouth was a bustling river town with a federal customs house and was an important shipping point for goods

en route to the deepwater port of Norfolk, Virginia via the Dismal Swamp Canal. During the Civil War, the town was a strategically important supply depot for the Union army, and was the site of several pivotal battles for control of the region.

Accessible by: U.S. Highway 64

It might surprise you to know: Around 1584, English explorers seeking a place to establish England's first colony in the New World may have sailed up the Roanoke River past present-day Plymouth.

If you visit: Plymouth and Washington County have several museums, including the Roanoke River Lighthouse and Maritime Museum, the Port o' Plymouth Civil War Museum, and God's Creation Natural Wildlife Museum, all in downtown Plymouth. Canoe rentals are available for paddling the Roanoke. Also, Somerset Plantation, a restored antebellum plantation, is near Creswell and is a short drive from Plymouth.

Washington

Waterfront: On the Pamlico River, near its juncture with the Tar River.

Founded: In the early 1770s, known as the Forks of the Tar.

History: Washington's location on the Pamlico made it an important shipping center in its early days.

Accessible by: U.S. Highway 17 and U.S. Highway 264

It might surprise you to know: In 1776 at the outbreak of the American Revolution, residents of the settlement on the banks of the Pamlico and Tar rivers changed its name to Washington to honor General George Washington. Today, residents prefer that their town be referred to as "the Original Washington" and are less-than-fond of it being called "Little Washington," as it often is in other parts of North Carolina.

If you visit: The North Carolina Estuarium on the Pamlico River in downtown Washington has more than 200 exhibits that tell the story of the state's rivers and sounds.