

The Outer Banks

For centuries, first the Indians and then the white colonists, had to adapt to the ever-changing conditions on what today is called the Outer Banks.

The thin ribbon of sand that forms the chain of islands known as the Outer Banks is bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by the sounds. The shapes of the islands and the inlets that run between them continue to be altered by hurricanes, nor'easters and other weather events.

Accessing the ocean and the sounds was accomplished primarily by inlets that often proved to be moving targets as inlets were formed and then later filled with sand and disappeared. Maps of the coastline show many places named "New Inlet" although there is no inlet currently in those places.

The one exception has been Ocracoke Inlet between Ocracoke and Portsmouth islands. Marine geologists estimate that the existing Inlet, with some minor changes, has been in place for at least 2500 years.

During the English exploration of the 1500's, most likely the ships came through the Ocracoke inlet, making it a long sail to Roanoke Island. At that time, there was a small shallow inlet between Hatteras and Ocracoke islands but probably was avoided for fear of going aground. By the early 1700s, that shallow inlet had filled in and the two islands were then just one long one.

But in 1846, a hurricane created two major inlets. One, now called Oregon Inlet, sliced through the sand, leaving today's Pea Island to the south and Bodie Island to the north. And a the second inlet, now known as Hatteras Inlet, once again separated Hatteras Island from Ocracoke Island. Both inlets are still used by vessels, but sometimes there are problems with shoaling which makes passage treacherous.

The creation of inlets is not just a yesteryear phenomenon. In 2003, Hurricane Isabel created an inlet between the villages of Buxton and Hatteras that was filled in by the North Carolina Department of Transportation, so that services and access could be restored to Hatteras village.

In August 2011, Hurricane Irene created two inlets, one on Pea Island and another at Mirlo Beach, just north of the village of Rodanthe on Hatteras Island. The latter was promptly filled in but NC 12, the only road access to the island, also was cut through on Pea Island. The road was closed for about two months while a temporary bridge was installed. Discussions continue on when, where and how to build a permanent bridge over the area.

Nearby, according to maps, is one of those places named New Inlet, but

whatever was there has come and gone because that is how life goes on the Outer Banks.

Sandy Semans, writer, editor and resident of the Outer Banks