

Traveling to Bogue Banks

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HISTORY STORIES

Reflections of Pine Knoll Shores

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The separation between Bogue Banks and the mainland is not a vast distance, a mile or two at best, but until the first bridge was opened in 1928, a boat was needed to make the crossing. Water crossings are characteristic of travel in eastern North Carolina—a characteristic that has defined its development for centuries. This part of eastern North Carolina is not an easy place to get to.

Current day visitors from elsewhere in the nation often remark upon arriving, “You’re two hours from the nearest interstate highway!” Some see the island’s remoteness as a benefit and others as a frustration. Factors that cause difficulty in getting to Bogue Banks and efforts to address these conditions tell a story of great ambition and hard reality. There were times when getting here was easier than today, and other times when it was much more difficult.

Settlement of the nearby mainland started more than three centuries ago and was slow because the area was almost completely isolated from the interior. Beaufort, originally a fishing village and port of safety dating from the late 1600s, was established in 1709; Morehead City was a dot on the map known as Shepard’s Point as early as 1723; Newport was a river landing and small settlement as far back as 1720, and several other settlements prospered for a while in the 1700s and 1800s.

Early explorers and settlers came by foot and horseback, but found the going difficult and slow because many rivers and wetlands had to be crossed. Eastern Carolina is a land of water. Carteret County’s boundary encompasses 1,341 square miles, and of this total, 61% (or 821 square miles) of the area consists of bays, sounds, lakes, wetlands, rivers or estuaries.

Before the early settlers, Giovanni da Verrazano is credited with being the first European to see and set foot on Bogue Banks. In 1524, he traveled from France on a voyage that took 50 days, and during the trip he lost two of his three ships. His flagship made it to our coast and remained off the beach, sending a small boat ashore for a brief stay.

Beaufort was the main settlement on this part of the coast in the early 1700s. The attraction was a sheltered harbor with access to the Atlantic Ocean. Trading goods—mainly ship stores, lumber, food provisions and salt—could be brought to town by wagon or small boat and transported by ship to customers in need. In those early times, Beaufort and other settlements in these parts were remote and cut off from the rest of the growing population of the colonies. It was reported that it took 14 days for word of the signing of the Declaration of Independence to reach Beaufort.

The early roads were little better than wide sandy paths. Eventually, a few were paved with wood planks, and in some places, shells were used. Wooden bridges crossed some small streams, while a ferry of sorts was needed at any large river. Until the mid-19th century, the customary method of long distance passenger travel was by boat, wagon or stagecoach. The stagecoach offered a crowded compartment, limited space for luggage, and a rough and unstable ride over roadways that were dusty in dry weather and muddy when wet.

A dramatic change to available transportation options in North Carolina took place during the administration of Governor John Motley Morehead in the 1840s. He spearheaded construction of railroads throughout the state. His efforts resulted in extending the Atlantic & North Carolina Railroad to Shepard’s Point in 1858. Shepard’s Point was eventually named Morehead City.

The train terminated at the Atlantic Hotel Station, located between 1st and 4th streets on the sound front. North Carolina’s railroad system was quite progressive

for the day. When the train reached Morehead City, there were less than 30,000 miles of track in the U.S. Track mileage peaked in 1916 at 254,000. Rail passenger miles traveled in the U.S. peaked in 1944 at 98 billion. By 2000, that number had fallen to 15 billion. A decline of a similar magnitude happened in Morehead City, with passenger rail service ending in March 1950. During its existence, steam locomotives powered the trains.

Early on, the expanding network of railroads along the east coast made travel to Morehead City a convenient and pleasant experience. From the 1880s through the 1930s, Morehead City was a mecca for the social and political elite of central coastal states. Resort hotels on its sound front during that era had a reputation for fine accommodations and a lively cultural and party atmosphere. Lower summer temperatures and cooling breezes of the coast, when compared to the conditions elsewhere in the states, were a powerful attraction.

Alice Hoffman had a home on Bogue Banks from 1915 to 1953, and until she settled here permanently in the late 1930s, she traveled by train to and from Morehead City on regular trips between here and New York City and for points beyond.

In the early 1900s, motorized vehicles replaced horse-powered transportation. As the popularity of automobile and truck transportation grew, a system of better roads grew as well. Better roads gradually made their way to this part of the coast.

More change came, starting in mid-century. After World War II, passenger rail travel in the U.S. plummeted as the automobile took its toll and budding commercial airlines impacted traffic for longer trips.

The building of the Interstate Highway System, begun after World War II, bypassed the eastern Carolina coastal region in favor of an interior route connecting major cities. However, for 14 years, this coastal region had commercial airline service. Piedmont Airlines provided regularly scheduled passenger service from Morehead-Beaufort airport, beginning on May 8, 1948, and ending September 30, 1962. There were daily flights offering direct connections to all major airports on the east coast.

At one time, passenger accommodations from this region included stagecoach, ships, railroads and commercial airlines, but no longer. Travelers today come by car via limited access highways. The nearest major hub airport is Raleigh-Durham, a 3½-hour drive. Regional airports at New Bern (one-hour drive) and Jacksonville (1½-hour drive) offer connecting flights to major east coast hubs. Those with their own aircraft can land at Michael J. Smith Field in Beaufort. The nearest passenger train can be boarded in Wilson, a two-hour drive, with service to New York, Savannah, Charlotte, points in between, and connections to other destinations. In 2012, Amtrak initiated bus service from Morehead City to its Wilson train station.

In spite of all the impediments to convenient travel, thousands visit our coast every year to enjoy its easy-going, relaxed living. Remoteness, in a way, is one of the area’s attractions.

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A 1950s ad for Piedmont Airlines showing routes to eastern North Carolina, which appeared in *The State* magazine (now *Our State*)