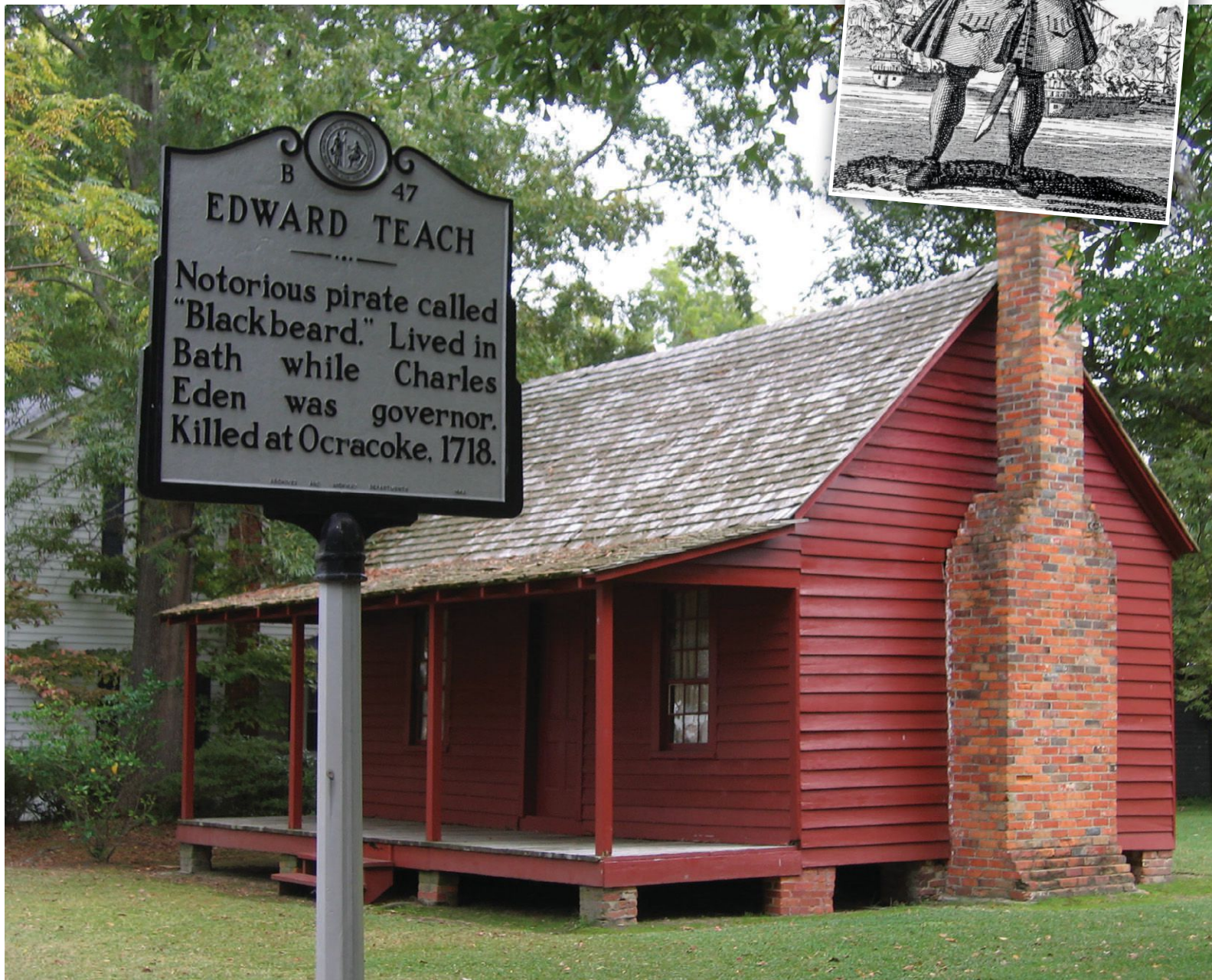


The Legend of Blackbeard

Tales of the infamous pirate endure in coastal Georgia more than 300 years after his death.

By Paul F. Brown

Coastal Georgia has long held a place in pirate lore. In “Treasure Island,” Robert Louis Stevenson named Savannah as the town where Long John Silver visited Capt. Flint. But more than a century before that novel’s publication, one of Georgia’s barrier islands was named after history’s most notorious pirate. Legend has it that Blackbeard left behind his treasure there, roughly 20 miles north of Sea Island.



Blackbeard's former home in Bath, North Carolina



Blackbeard Island, located off the coast of Georgia, is a national wildlife refuge.

A Pirate's Life

Blackbeard's real name was Edward Thatch (or Teach) and he is suspected to have been born around 1680 in Bristol, England. Biographical details are scarce until 1713, around the time he turned to piracy under Capt. Benjamin Hornigold. Tall and thin, with a long, black beard, Thatch was captaining his own ship by the fall of 1717—and developing a fearsome reputation. Posthumous accounts claimed that, in battle, Thatch tied slow-burning matches in his beard to inspire fear in those he faced.

For a time, Thatch roamed the Caribbean, where he captured several ships including a French vessel that he renamed *Queen Anne's Revenge*. He sailed his fleet to the South Carolina coastline in May 1718, anchored near Charles Town (now Charleston) and raided ships attempting to enter the port. From there, Thatch and his crew continued north, but the ship hit a sandbar at Topsail (now Beaufort) Inlet and had to be abandoned. (The wreckage wasn't discovered until 1996.)

In June, Thatch temporarily settled in Bath, which today is North Carolina's oldest town. The colony's governor pardoned Thatch's numerous maritime crimes, but other authorities weren't so lenient. That November, the

Royal Navy caught up with Thatch's fleet at Ocracoke Inlet. After a volley of explosives, the pirates boarded the military vessel, only to be surprised by the soldiers hiding within. Thatch died on deck on Nov. 22, 1718.

The Namesake Island

The legend of Blackbeard has circulated for more than three centuries, with towns all along the southern Atlantic coast claiming some connection to him. There are tales that Blackbeard hid his loot on the barrier island just north of Sapelo—an area that became coastal Georgia in 1735. Today this remote, uninhabited island appears to be the ideal pirate refuge, and an aptly named one.

Last year, coastal Georgia historian Buddy Sullivan published *“Blackbeard Island: A History,”* the definitive book on the isle. “The earliest official use of the name was on a Colonial Georgia survey of Sapelo and Blackbeard Island in 1760,” Sullivan says. “We don't know the exact year it was named or even who named it.”

At 5,618 acres, Blackbeard Island is one the state's smallest barrier islands. “It was never large enough for agriculture or to make [it] as profitable as the larger islands,” Sullivan explains. “But in 1800, the U.S. Navy bought

Blackbeard Island for a timber reserve, because it had a great deal of live oak timber on it.” Live oak is strong, weather resistant and doesn't decay easily; therefore, it has long been valued for shipbuilding. The island remains federal property.

One period in the island's history speaks to present-day concerns about virus transmission. “After several bad yellow fever and malaria epidemics along the southeastern coast, the federal government established quarantine stations to ensure that all ships were free of any contagion before entering American ports,” Sullivan says. “From 1880 to 1910, Blackbeard Island served as the South Atlantic Quarantine Station.” Ruins from the station's medical buildings are the only man-made structures found on the island.

Since 1924, the island has been a national wildlife refuge. Public recreation there includes hiking, fishing, cycling and in-season deer hunting, though access is limited. “There's no camping there—no facilities of any kind—and no way to get there unless you have your own boat or hire one,” Sullivan says. “But its remoteness and inaccessibility are what make Blackbeard Island so unique.”

A Natural Refuge

Although Blackbeard Island plays no part in the documented timeline of Thatch's life, Sullivan thinks the pirate must have known about it. “The barrier islands would make ideal anchorages and hiding places if you're trying to evade the law, which, of course, Blackbeard was doing,” he says. “He would have been very familiar with the waters around Blackbeard, Sapelo and coastal Georgia [in general].”

Locals claim that Blackbeard hid treasure onshore there and wrapped a chain around a live oak tree to mark the spot. Purportedly, a longtime resident of Sapelo Island once found the chain, but Sullivan says it was most likely a remnant of the island's timber operations and that no evidence of a treasure has ever been found. “The chain story is just that—a story and a myth,” he notes. Of course, digging on federal property is strictly forbidden without prior approval.

Perhaps Blackbeard Island's greatest treasure is its preserved landscape, one Thatch would likely have recognized even to this day. “The island is largely a maritime forest of native live oak and pine timber,” Sullivan says. “You can go to the island now and see exactly what it would have looked like when Blackbeard was there in the early 18th century. No doubt about it.” ○