

William Byrd on the people and environment of North Carolina

WITH COMMENTARY BY L. MAREN WOOD

William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (Petersburg, Virginia: Edmund and Julius C. Ruffin, 1841).

As you read...

DRAWING A BOUNDARY

By the 1720s, the governments of both Virginia and North Carolina wanted to expand settlement from the coast into the interior. Before real expansion could take place, the two governments had to agree on a dividing line between the colonies. For years, there had been a dispute about the actual border between Virginia and North Carolina, which made it difficult to know which colonial government had jurisdiction over the people living along the boundary line. In 1728, the two colonies agreed to a survey the area and draw an official border.

WILLIAM BYRD

William Byrd II, a wealthy plantation owner, was one of the commissioners from Virginia. Byrd kept a journal documenting his travels through North Carolina and Virginia, excerpts of which are printed here. Byrd described the group's difficult journey and commented on the settlers, Indian communities, and the topography and wild life of North Carolina. Byrd often exaggerated and in some cases may simply have made things up, but he paints a picture of the rugged, wild, conditions in North Carolina at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

March 13th



Figure 1. The wetlands of northeastern North Carolina did not make for easy traveling.

A quarter mile from the Dismal¹... the ground began to be already full of sunken holes and slashes, which had, here and there, some few reeds growing in them. It is hardly credible how little the bordering inhabitants were acquainted with this mighty swamp, notwithstanding they had lived their whole lives within smell of it. Yet, as great strangers as they were to it, they pretended to be very exact in their account of its dimensions, and were positive it could not be above seven or eight miles wide,² but knew no more of the matter than star-gazers know of the distance of the fixed stars. At the same time, they were simple enough to amuse our men with idle stories of the lions, panthers and alligators, they were like to encounter in that dreadful place. In short, we saw plainly there was no intelligence of this terra incognita to be got, but from our own experience.

March 14th



Figure 2. Today rhubarb occasionally shows up in pies, but in the eighteenth century it was used in medicine.

Before nine of the clock this morning, the provisions, bedding and other necessaries were made up into packs for the men to carry on their shoulders into the Dismal³...their loads weighed from 60 to 70 pounds, in just proportion to the strength of those who were to bear them. It would have been unconscionable to have saddled them with burthens heavier than that, when they were to lug them through a filthy bog, which was hardly practicable with no burthen at all. Besides this luggage at their backs, they were obliged to measure the distance, mark the trees, and clear the way for the surveyors every step they went. For their greater safety, the commissioners took care to furnish them with Peruvian bark, rhubarb and hipococanah,⁴ in case they might happen, in that wet journey, to be taken with fevers or fluxes. The skirts of [The dismal] were thinly planted with dwarf reeds and gall bushes, but when we got into the Dismal itself, we found the reeds grew there much taller and closer, and, to mend the matter, were so interlaced with bamboo-briers, that there was no scuffling through them without the help of pioneers.⁵ At the same time, we found the ground moist and trembling under our feet like a quagmire, insomuch that it was an easy matter to run a tenfoot pole up to the head in it, without exerting any uncommon strength to do it. Two of the men, whose burthens were the least cumbersome, had orders to march before, with their tomahawks, and clear the way, in order to make an opening for the surveyors.

March 17th

Since the surveyors had entered the Dismal, they had laid eyes on no living creature: neither bird nor beast, insect nor reptile came in view. Doubtless, the eternal shade that broods over this mighty bog, and hinders the sunbeams from blessing the ground, makes it an uncomfortable habitation for any thing that has life. Not so much as a Zealand frog could endure so aguish⁶ a situation. It had one beauty, however, that delighted the eye, though at the expense of all the other senses: the moisture of the soil preserves a continual verdure, and makes every plant an evergreen but at the same time the foul damp ascends

without ceasing, corrupt the air, and render it unfit for respiration. Not even a turkey buzzard will venture to fly over it.

April 1st

The high land of North Carolina was barren, and covered with a deep sand; and the low grounds were wet and boggy, insomuch that several of our horses were mired, and gave us frequent opportunities to show our horsemanship.

April 8th

Thus ended our progress for this season,⁷ which we may justly say was attended with all the success that could be expected. Besides the punctual performance of what was committed to us, we had the pleasure to bring back every one of our company in perfect health. And this we must acknowledge to be a singular blessing, considering the difficulties and dangers to which they had been exposed. We had reason to fear the many waters and sunken grounds, through which we were obliged to wade, might have thrown the men into sundry acute distempers.

October 1st

Our men killed a very fat buck and several turkeys. These two kinds of meat boiled together, with the addition of a little rice or French barley, made excellent soup ... Our Indian ⁸ was very superstitious in this matter, and told us, with a face full of concern, that if we continued to boil venison and turkey together, we should for the future kill nothing, because the spirit that presided over the woods would drive all the game out of our sight. But we had the happiness to find this an idle superstition, and though his argument could not convince us, yet our repeated experience at last, with much ado, convinced him.

Oct 2

Some of our people had shot a great wild cat,⁹ which was that fatal moment making a comfortable meal upon a fox-squirrel, and an ambitious sportsman of our company claimed the merit of killing this monster after it was dead. The wild cat is as big again as any household cat, and much the fiercest inhabitant of the woods. Whenever it is disabled, it will tear its own flesh for madness. Although a panther will run away from a man, a wild cat will only make a surly retreat, and now and then facing about, if he be too closely pursued; and will even pursue in his turn, if he observe the least sign of fear or even of caution in those that pretend to follow him. The flesh of this beast, as well as of the panther, is as white as veal, and altogether as sweet and delicious.

Oct 8th



Figure 3. Red wolf.

To hear what “entertained” Byrd, listen to the howling of red wolves here¹⁰, courtesy of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Red Wolf Recovery Team.

Our clothes suffered extremely by the bushes, and it was really as much as both our hands could do to preserve our eyes in our heads. Our poor horses, too, could hardly drag their loads through the saplings, which stood so close together that it was necessary for them to draw and carry at the same time... Our Indian knocked down a very fat doe, just time enough to hinder us from going supperless to bed... We were entertained this night with the yell of a whole family of wolves, in which we could distinguish the treble, tenor and bass, very clearly. These beasts of prey kept pretty much upon our track, being tempted by the garbage of the creatures we killed every day;¹¹ for which we were serenaded with their shrill pipes almost every night. This beast is not so untameable as the panther, but the Indians know how to gentle their whelps, and use them about their cabins instead of dogs.

October 25th

The air clearing up this morning, we were again agreeably surprised with a full prospect of the mountains. They discovered themselves both to the north and south of us, on either side, not distant above ten miles, according to our best computation. ... It had rained a little in the night, which dispersed the smoke and opened this romantic scene to us all at once, though it was again hid from our eyes as we moved forwards, by the rough woods we had the misfortune to be engaged with. The bushes were so thick for near four miles together, that they tore the deer skins to pieces that guarded the bread bags. Though, as rough as the woods were, the soil was extremely good all the way, being washed down from the neighbouring hills into the plain country.

Oct 27th

It is stranger still that the government has never thought it worth the expense of making an accurate survey of the mountains, that we might be masters of that natural fortification before the French, who in some places have settlements not very distant from it. It therefore concerns his majesty’s service very nearly, and the safety of his subjects in this part of the world, to take possession of so important a barrier in time, lest our good friends, the French, and the Indians,¹² through their means, prove a perpetual annoyance to these colonies.

Oct 29th

An unhappy man, who had lost himself once before, straggled again so far in pursuit of a deer, that he was hurried a second time quite out of his knowledge; and night coming on before he could recover the camp, he was obliged to lie down, without any of the comforts of fire, food or covering; nor would his fears suffer him to sleep very sound, because, to his

great disturbance, the wolves howled all that night, and the panthers screamed most frightfully.

Oct 30th

Though we had finished the line, yet we had not yet near finished our fatigue. We had after all two hundred good miles at least to our several habitations, and the horses were brought so low, that we were obliged to travel on foot great part of the way, and that in our boots, too, to save our legs from being torn to pieces by the bushes and briars. Had we not done this, we must have left all our horses behind, which could now hardly drag their legs after them, and with all the favour we could show the poor animals, we were forced to set seven of them free, not far from the foot of the mountains. ...

Nov. 4th

One of the young fellows we had sent to bring up the tired horses entertained us in the evening with a remarkable adventure he had met with that day. He had straggled, it seems, from his company in a mist, and made a cub of a year old betake itself to a tree. While he was new-priming his piece,¹³ with intent to fetch it down, the old gentlewoman ¹⁴ appeared, and perceiving her heir apparent in distress, advanced open-mouthed to his relief. The man was so intent upon his game, that she had approached very near him before he perceived her. But finding his danger, he faced about upon the enemy, which immediately reared upon her posteriors, and put herself in battle array. The man, admiring at the bear's assurance, endeavoured to fire upon her, but by the dampness of the priming, his gun did not go off. He cocked it a second time, and had the same misfortune. After missing fire twice, he had the folly to punch the beast with the muzzle of his piece; but mother Bruin,¹⁵ being upon her guard, seized the weapon with her paws, and by main strength wrenched it out of the fellow's hands. The man being thus fairly disarmed, thought himself no longer a match for the enemy, and therefore retreated as fast as his legs could carry him. The brute naturally grew bolder upon the flight of her adversary, and pursued him with all her heavy speed. For some time it was doubtful whether fear made one run faster, or fury the other. But after an even course of about fifty yards, the man had the mishap to stumble over a stump, and fell down at his full length. He now would have sold his life a penny-worth; but the bear, apprehending there might be some trick in the fall, instantly halted, ... In the mean while, the man had with great presence of mind resolved to make the bear believe he was dead, by lying breathless on the ground, in hopes that the beast would be too generous to kill him over again. ... But in about two minutes, to his unspeakable comfort, he was raised from the dead by the barking of a dog, belonging to one of his companions, who came seasonably to his rescue, and drove the bear from pursuing the man to take care of her cub, which she feared might now fall into a second distress.

Nov. 7th

And now I am upon the subject of insects, it may not be improper to mention some few remedies against those that are most vexatious in this climate. The ticks are either deer-ticks, or those that annoy the cattle. The first kind are long, and take a very strong gripe, being most in remote woods, above the inhabitants. The other are round, and more gently insinuate themselves into the flesh, being in all places where cattle are frequent.... The horse flies are not only a great grievance to horses, but likewise to those that ride them.... Though this insect be no bigger than an ordinary fly, it bites very smartly... Bears' oil is used by the Indians as a general defence against every species of vermin. Among the rest, they say it keeps both bugs and mosquitoes from assaulting their persons, which would otherwise devour such uncleanly people... [but] the remedy was worse than the disease.

Nov. 15



Figure 4. Byrd apparently wasn't impressed by the size of North Carolina's alligators, but they're big enough to do serious damage to people who stumble into their habitats.

In Santee river, as in several others of Carolina, a small kind of alligator is frequently seen, which perfumes the water with a musky smell. They seldom exceed eight feet in length in these parts... The heat of the climate does not only make them bigger, but more fierce and voracious. They watch the cattle there when they come to drink and cool themselves in the river; and because they are not able to drag them into the deep water, they make up by stratagem what they want in force. They swallow great stones, the weight of which being added to their strength, enables them to tug a moderate cow under water, and as soon as they have drowned her, they discharge the stones out of their maw and then feast upon the carcass¹⁶. However, as fierce and as strong as these monsters are, the Indians will surprise them napping as they float upon the surface, get astride upon their necks, then whip a short piece of wood like a truncheon into their jaws, and holding the ends with their two hands, hinder them from diving by keeping their mouths open, and when they are almost spent, they will make to the shore, where their riders knock them on the head and eat them.

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Notes

1. The Great Dismal Swamp.
2. The Great Dismal Swamp is estimated to be 177 square miles. For comparison, New York City today is 301 square miles.

3. A wealthy man and plantation owner like Byrd would not have helped carry supplies. It would have been considered “beneath” someone of such a high rank to do such a menial task. The men Byrd refers to would have been free white men who were paid for their efforts as well as enslaved African American men.
4. Peruvian Bark is also known as cinchona bark. A green shrub grown in South America. It’s bark is a good source of quinine, which is used to cure malaria. Rhubarb is a plant that is grown today by people in their gardens and used in pies. It also has medicinal purposes, and the men on this expedition would have used it to help reduce fevers. Hipocoacana is another plant that presumably had medicinal qualities that helped with fevers.
5. In this context, a pioneer would have been a man hired to go in front of the surveyors and commissioners and cut down brush or trees to prepare a path for the horses.
6. The word “ague” describes malaria or another type of illness that is accompanied by fevers and shaking. Aguish is an adjective that is used to describe an environment where people or animals could very easily become infected with malaria.
7. After finishing survey the coast and the Dismal swamp, the men returned home until after the spring rains and summer heat had passed. They began again in September of 1728, meeting in Edenton. From there they journeyed westward to the Appalachian mountains.
8. It was very common for white colonists to hire an Indian man to help guide them on expeditions. The Indian would have learned at least one European language and would not only share his knowledge of the local geography, animal and plant life, but could also act as an interpreter and translator between Europeans and other Indians. Later in his journal, Byrd refers to this Indian guide by the name of Bearskin.
9. Byrd is referring either to a lynx or bobcat.
10. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/6906>.
11. Elsewhere in the journal, Byrd wrote that the men sometimes killed more animals than they could eat in one night. When that happened, they tried to pack some of the meat to eat the next day, but they were limited as to how much they could carry. Also, there would have been a lot of waste simply from butchering the animal — bones, skin, fat, organs, etc.
12. The English were not the only European country establishing colonies in North America. The Dutch, French, and Spanish were also competing for territory. The English and the French were historic enemies, having waged wars against each other on and on off for hundreds of years.

Although the two countries and their colonies were technically at peace when Byrd wrote this journal, there were many tensions between the French and English colonists in North America. He was worried that the French would launch an attack on English colonies, or that they would encroach into Virginia and North Carolina colonies. In the years after Byrd’s expedition, the French and English, along with their Indian allies, would fight wars from 1740–1748 and from 1754–1763.
13. *Priming* means loading a gun. Loading a black-powder gun was a very elaborate process that could take twenty to thirty seconds and would have been difficult to do under pressure. Because of how complicated they were to load, guns in the colonial period were notoriously inaccurate and unreliable.
14. the mother bear

15. the Dutch word for bear
16. Byrd is likely repeating a story he heard from settlers or Indians. Alligators do not swallow rocks to make themselves heavier in the water!

About the author

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