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Where did the term “Bogue” originate and what does it tell us?

Quantifying the volume of sand entering and exiting our beaches and measuring shoreline positions within inches of accuracy are almost commonplace nowadays. Advances in satellite-based global positioning systems, echo-sounders that give us exact water depth, equipment to tease out the effects of boat pitch, roll, and yaw motions, and don't forget super computers to store and process the data are all part of today's beach and nearshore mapping program. We commonly refer to all of this as “beach monitoring” and the end product is incredibly precise and can be digitally archived for future generations.

But what if we wanted to get a sense of our shoreline here at Bogue Banks from a century ago, or even hundreds of years before that? Bogue Banks appears to have some geologic good luck on its side with most oceanfront dune elevations naturally eclipsing the 20 or even 25 feet mark in height. Just behind or even including the oceanfront lies one of the most prolific barrier island maritime forests to be found anywhere. This “high and dry” theme is virtually unparalleled for barrier islands along the Atlantic coast – especially for a continuous barrier island like ours which extends for approximately 25 miles in length.

Although not near as precise as the technology of today, older maps and folklore can provide us some very unique insights to whether or not our “high and dry” status has always been the case. Will we be able to decipher shoreline changes to the foot or volume changes to the cubic yard? Of course not, but we can draw some very interesting conclusions.

Bogue Banks has historically been referred to as Bogue Bank, Borden Bank, Bordens Bank, Boug Bank, Cape Lookout Banks, and Stanford Islands. Interestingly, the origin of the name “Bogue” remains somewhat of a mystery despite being one of the oldest place names in all of coastal North Carolina. One theory lies that Bogue Banks was named after Josiah Bogue who settled in the area in the early 1700s, but that theory can be readily dismissed as maps pre-dating the 1700s routinely incorporate the name Bogue (e.g., Bogue Banks and/or Bogue Inlet).

The word Bogue has also been reported to be a Choctaw Indian reference to a stream or a water passage. The term has evolved to refer to a swampy or marshy area, which is a plausible origin for the name of Bogue. But perhaps the most romantic, and quite possibly most realistic origin comes from a derivation of a Spanish term indicating movement to the leeward, or side opposite the wind. The Spanish were known to frequently visit or raid coastal North Carolina in the middle part of the second millennium, and because Bogue Banks is orientated along an east-west axis in sharp contrast to the north-south trending barrier islands from Cape Henry, Virginia south to Cape Lookout; it is quite possible the Spanish reference to “land to the leeward” could have found its way onto maps and charts.



The plural connotation in the word Bogue Banks also remains somewhat of an unknown. Today, Bogue Banks is a continuous ~25-mile long island and maybe should more aptly be called Bogue Bank (singular). Actually, the island has been dissected only once for any period of considerable time, at a location approximately 5 miles west of Beaufort Inlet in the Town Atlantic Beach. This water passage was known as Cheeseman Inlet and was generally open from 1750 – 1810. We do know that hurricane *Hazel* in 1954 and more recently, hurricane *Donna* in 1960 caused some temporary breaching of Bogue Banks, particularly in Atlantic Beach and Emerald Isle.

And one other interesting fact to add is that only three inlets in the entire State are known to have been continuously open since 1585 – two of the three border Bogue Banks (Bogue and Beaufort Inlets), with Ocracoke Inlet rounding off the list. Again, this little tidbit also lends itself to supporting the “high and dry” and stability premise of Bogue Banks – something we qualitatively monitor today.



Photo: Bogue Inlet (October 2006) – Also one of only three inlets in N.C. that have been continuously open since before 1585.

Sources: *“Place Names of the Outer Banks”* by Roger L. Payne, 1985.
“How to Live with an Island” by Orrin H. Pilkey, Jr., Orrin H. Pilkey, Sr., & Robb Turner, 1975.