

# Docent Dispatch

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## Pirates of the Virginia Capes

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### Pirates of the Virginia Capes<sup>1</sup>

During Queen Anne's War against the French and the Spanish in 1713 the British Crown recruited thousands of privateers. With the war over many of these privateers turned to piracy. Almost immediately these buccaneers and their skull and crossbones flagged ships threatened the Virginia Capes.<sup>2</sup>

The Gulf Stream was a salt water expressway for pirate fleets sailing up from the Caribbean. Most notorious among them was Edward Teach, aka Edward Thatch, aka Blackbeard.

When the royal governor of the Bahamas, Woodes Rogers - a reformed buccaneer himself, drove the pirate fleet out of its Caribbean strongholds in July 1718, their attacks up and down the Virginia coastline only intensified. They were attracted first by the colony's fleet of merchant ships loaded with tobacco, the most valuable cargo the pirates had encountered since their privateering days when their prizes were gold laden Spanish

Galleons. The Virginia coastline also provided the pirates with a plethora of bays and inlets where they could hide.

But late 1718 Blackbeard in his flagship "Queen Anne's Revenge" with her 40 cannons was leading a fleet of Pirate ships in search of a new stronghold. Their chosen port-of-call would be Ocracoke Island just two days out of Virginia's economically and strategically vital port city of Norfolk (founded 1682) and its expansive natural harbor of Hampton Roads.

Virginia's Lieutenant Governor, Alexander Spotswood had a secret plan. Hiding his scheme even from the members of the Colony's Royal Council in Williamsburg, Spotswood put Lieutenant Robert Maynard of the British Navy and his crew on two light and fast but well armed sloops and sent them in search of Blackbeard and the pirate fleet. The little flotilla left Hampton Roads in November.

### CARLYLE HOUSE

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Although both of his ships ran aground, as did Blackbeard's "Queen Anne's Revenge" and he lost 30 crew members, Lieutenant Maynard returned to Norfolk in January with the severed head of Blackbeard hanging from the bowsprit of his ship.

Spottswood's bold action put Virginia in the vanguard of those who would sweep the Pirate plague from the seaways of the world and put an end to the golden age of piracy.

1 Notes on a series of articles by Mark St. John Erickson, merick-son@dailypress.com published in the Newport News, VA, Daily Press, May 26, 2012. The complete pirate series is available at:

<https://www.dailypress.com/features/history/dp-pirate-series-in-hampton-roads-gallery-storygallery.html>

2 References: Donald G. Shomette  
"Pirates of the Chesapeake Bay"