

MAPPING THE SACRED PLACES

by Jan DeBlieu

I once drew a map to my home on the North Carolina Outer Banks for a friend who wanted to visit. I was new then on Hatteras Island, new to the salt-scorched landscape and interlocking planes of earth, sea, and sky. I felt newly awakened as well, as if I had spent the previous years with my eyes and my thoughts half-lidded. Every day I set aside time to explore unfamiliar terrain and wonder at the great schools of fish, the falcons and sea birds that migrated past the islands with the tug of seasonal currents.

Since there was not much to show on my map—just a single road beelining down a skinny arm of sand—I decorated it with my own favorite landmarks. On the north end I put three arches covered with a mane of vertical lines; these were the grassy, camel-hump dunes that fronted the ocean. Halfway to my house I drew a tuxedoed heron with hot-pink legs; this marked the marshy flats where I had stumbled on a group of black-necked stilts and the messy stacks of twigs they used as nests. Last I drew a stick-figure crustacean waving a flag on a nearby beach. I went to that beach often to watch ghost crabs skirmishing, shoving each other with round, pearly claws as if locked in mortal combat. Next to the figure I penciled in the words, “Ghost Crab Acres.”

I meant the map to be comical, but also to honor places on Hatteras where I had witnessed something important or particularly beautiful. I am not much of an illustrator, and at completion the map looked like something a first-grader might have drawn. My friend called a few days after she received it. “Are these amusement parks or something?” she asked. I realized sheepishly

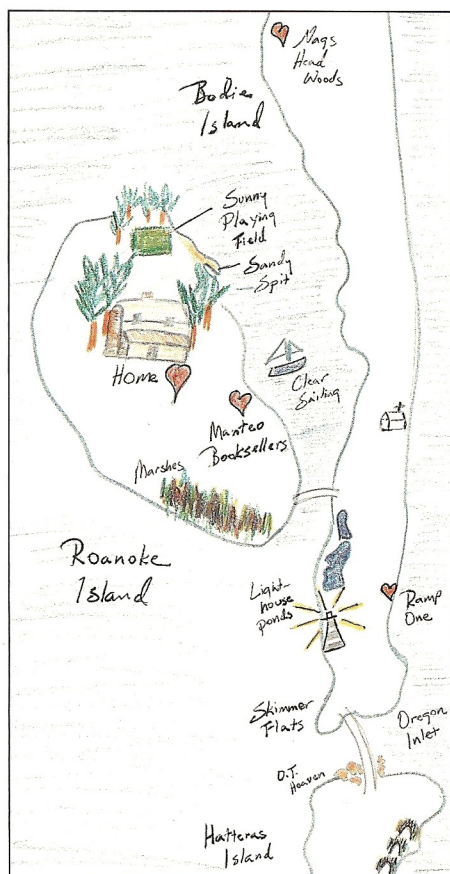
that the connection I felt to each landmark was too personal, too powerful, to be explained by a simple drawing.

Now I wish I had kept that map for myself, or made another. I wish I had drawn a new map with equally foolish figures for each of my nine years on these islands. Put together they would compose a running chronicle of the places I have held dear here, a mental history of my courtship with the land.

I am more insular these days, and too caught up in the eddies of family life to do much exploring. While still curious about the natural forces that play across the islands, I no longer have the same white-hot drive to observe and learn. I live on a pine-sheltered ridge on Roanoke Island, out of sight of the ever-shifting horizons. The latest atlas of my world would mark hideaways in the dunes and marshes, but also the houses of close friends, the bookstore in nearby Manteo, and the grassy field where I take my young son to romp.

We map, each of us, mentally and physically, every day of our lives. We map to keep ourselves oriented, and to keep ourselves sane. “The very word ‘lost’ in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty;” the urban planner Kevin Lynch once wrote, “it carries overtones of utter disaster.... Let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the

sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being.” And we map the places we love in much more detail than the places we dislike. “The sweet sense of home is strongest,” Lynch wrote, “when home is not only familiar but distinctive as well.”



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Map of Raleigh's Virginia, by John White, 1590. Considered to be "the most carefully detailed piece of cartography for any part of North America to be made in the sixteenth century" (David Beers Quinn).

Recently a friend pointed out to me that these sandy reefs where I find my own sweet sense of home have been mapped (in the standard, two-dimensional sense of the term) longer than any site in North America. In 1585 an unknown British draftsman, sailing to the Outer Banks with a military expedition, drew a sketch of the land's lay believed to be the first European depiction of the New World.

The drawing scratched out on parchment shows six rectangular islands positioned like beads on a string. Behind them, to the west, lies a massive mainland with squarish inlets and coves. The draftsman must have been either seasick, homesick, or inept as a cartographer, for he rendered a clunky, unimaginative chart of a coastline that to my eye has as much grace and nuance as anywhere on earth.

A scant two years later the Outer Banks were set down on paper with more precision by the English artist John White, who voyaged to Roanoke Island with a group of men and women hoping to establish the first British colony in the New World. (Cut off from all contact with England during the war with Spain, the colony mysteriously disappeared.) White himself returned safely to England in the autumn of 1587 and completed a series of drawings of the land then called Virginia. His three maps of the Outer Banks, engraved and published in 1590, must have been compiled using compass readings and astronomical observations, the only techniques of survey known in his time. They are astoundingly accurate. One, titled "The Arrival of the Englishmen in Virginia," shows British barks in a serpent-plagued Atlantic just offshore from a row of pleasant-looking, forested islands. The second and third maps depict the Outer Banks virtually as we know them today: as arching dribbles of sand reaching far to sea; as less like *terra firma* and more like the delicate stroke of a calligrapher's pen. A wide sound separates the banks from a mainland fringed by rivers and creeks. White believed the islands to be slightly wider and more eastward reaching than they later proved to be. But all reefs change shape with the tides and seasons. Who can say that the banks of 400 years ago were not a bit plumper and more deeply arced than the banks of today?

It is fun to compare those early visions of the islands to later images produced by technology White and his contemporaries scarcely could have imagined. On March 12, 1969, the Apollo 9 space capsule orbited 120 miles over North Carolina. Although most of the continent was obscured by clouds that day, the skies above the eastern seaboard cleared long enough for an astronaut to snap a photograph that has become a signature image of the Outer Banks. To the east sparkles the black surface of the Atlantic, falling away with earth's curve; to the west lies the torn, lake-dappled membrane of the mainland. The Outer Banks sweep down the center in a plume of sediment-laden water, a single dry, sandy wisp.

Maps can never capture the essence of the land, any more than a photograph can depict a person's soul. Yet they so fascinate us that we draw them, etch them, paint them in a profusion of forms. One chart of the banks shows the location of 400-odd shipwrecks that have occurred off this "Graveyard of the Atlantic" since 1585. The map on the

wall of my study is engraved in the style of scrimshaw, with hachures marking the scooped edges of land, the intestinal courses of salty creeks. Five tiny lighthouses dot the ocean shore, showing the location of the banks' famous beacons.

A controversial rendering of the North Carolina coast was published in 1978 by four geologists who wanted to warn potential buyers of the toll that erosion can exact on island property. The Hatteras Island village of Rodanthe, where I first lived on the Outer Banks, was rated as extremely prone to flooding; it now has the highest rate of erosion along the North Carolina coast. Although we loved the town, my husband and I were chastened by the geologists' advice. When time came for us to buy a house, we settled on higher, drier land.

In the early 1980s oceanographers began using infrared cameras mounted on satellites to measure the surface temperature and chlorophyll content of ocean currents. For the first time scientists could watch the raucous mixing of water masses off the coast. East of the Outer Banks, where the warm Gulf Stream runs headlong into cold plumes from the Labrador Current, the satellite sensors produce charts that are vivid and jarring. Where the naked eye would see only indigo water, the sensors paint a cauldron of hot fuscias and golds colliding with icy knots of cobalt and jade.

To me these high-tech snapshots stir images of far more complex and enticing maps than I have ever seen set down on paper. What fluid, invisible highways are buried in the shifting currents, out of range of human sight and understanding? What wavering routes carry copepods, crustaceans, tunas, triggerfish, rays, and red drum to their far-flung summer and winter waters?

It is in the imagination, I think, that the art of mapping reaches its apex.

In 1960 Kevin Lynch published a book entitled *The Image of the City*. It describes a study by Lynch and several colleagues on the perceptions of people living in Boston, Los Angeles, and Jersey City. Lynch found that residents of each city drew maps with common features, such as main highways and government buildings, and that they would go out of their way to pass parks and green areas. Beyond that, the maps were highly idiosyncratic. From the mapping exercise and a series of interviews, Lynch concluded that even lifelong urban residents are not able to absorb all the images with which cities are so thickly piled. To give order to such a chaotic world, they choose a few important sights and use them as navigational posts.

If Lynch had taken time to look beyond the visual dissonance of city centers, I am convinced he would have found a similar filtering reflex among rural people. The capacity of the human mind is too limited to take in every detail of the landscape, be it town or country. We simply can't process the images with which we are besieged. And so we map, making note of what sights we deem, in a glance, to be vital.

"Visitor and native focus on very different aspects of the environment," writes the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. The visitor's on-the-spot mapmaking "is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures." In contrast, Tuan writes, the life-



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The Arrival of the Englishmen in Virginia, by John White, engraved by Theodor de Bry, 1590.

long resident moves through her environs with a shrewd and prejudiced eye. She knows which routes will clog with afternoon traffic, and which neighborhoods harbor muggers or snarling, unchained dogs.

Shortly after I moved to Hatteras I got a taste of how limited was my own vision of the island compared to that of a native. One day I took a walk to the shore of Pamlico Sound by way of a road through a small neighborhood. On my way home a fisherman stopped me to chat. "You interested in that land down there?" he asked, nodding toward the sound, where a vacant lot was posted with a "For Sale" sign.

I shook my head. We hadn't yet saved the money for property.

"It's a nice, high piece," the fisherman said. "Not too many left like that. You might ought to take a close look."

As he drove off I stared toward the lot in question. It had struck me as no different from the surrounding properties, many of which were too wet for septic tanks. Momentary paranoia set in: Was the fisherman making fun of me? Trying to sell me a bill of goods? I walked back to the lot—and noticed for the first time the gradual rise in the road, the dome in the land, the absence of the marsh plants that dotted adjacent sites. By island standards it was a veritable bluff, if not quite a mountain. How long would I have to live on Hatteras, I wondered, before I could discern all the subtleties of its spread?

I know now that my mental map of Hatteras will always

be less richly detailed than that of a true islander, because I lack the islander's cultural ties to the land. Certain places there became sacred to me because of a few elucidating, extraordinary brushes I had with the natural world. But if I had grown up on Hatteras, my list of sacred places might include the Rodanthe Community Center, or a historic lifesaving station where my grandfather served, or a beach where the annual town picnic is held. In strong, stable communities, residents develop traditions that consecrate certain sites—not just grand public parks or monuments, but meeting places that tend to be, in the words of the landscape architect Randolph Hester, "dilapidated, familiar, homey, and homely."

Fourteen years ago Hester conducted a study on the precious communal places—what he called the sacred structure—of Manteo, a town on Roanoke Island near my home. Until the 1960s Manteo was the most important town on the Outer Banks. As the county seat, it held administrative offices and a large courthouse; as the primary trade center, it held grocery and variety stores, family-run restaurants, and a commercial wharf on Roanoke Sound. All that changed, however, as the banks evolved from an enclave of fishing villages into a seaside resort. By 1980 several of the most important businesses had moved to the growing oceanfront town of Nags Head, and the Manteo waterfront was lined with vacant buildings.

Hester was then a professor at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. He had long been interested in the

subconscious attachments people form to places. A few years before, while redesigning a day care center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he had used an unconventional tactic to probe his clients' feelings. "The center was in a beautiful old Victorian building, nice but really funky," he said. "Everyone liked it. Before I drew up a design I did a standard survey with parents and teachers to find out what their values were and what kinds of activities they'd like to see in the center."

The survey indicated that the clients wanted a bright, state-of-the-art facility, "the kind of place you'd find in the suburbs," he said. "To achieve that, we would have had to raze the building. I was shocked."

Acting on a hunch, he approached a few parents and teachers and asked if they would repeat the survey under hypnosis. They agreed—and gave entirely different answers. "The single most important thing was, they wanted to plant a tree outside that would be big enough for kids to climb," Hester said. "And they wanted some sort of natural area, like a creek, where kids could explore and chase butterflies." He drew up two designs, one based on each survey. The parents and teachers voted overwhelmingly to accept the plan that left the building little changed and created natural play areas outside.

"I don't pretend to know what that means," Hester said. "But a psychologist friend of mine believes that people have all kinds of subconscious desires that they can't articulate. When they're presented with an option that honors those desires, that's the option they choose."

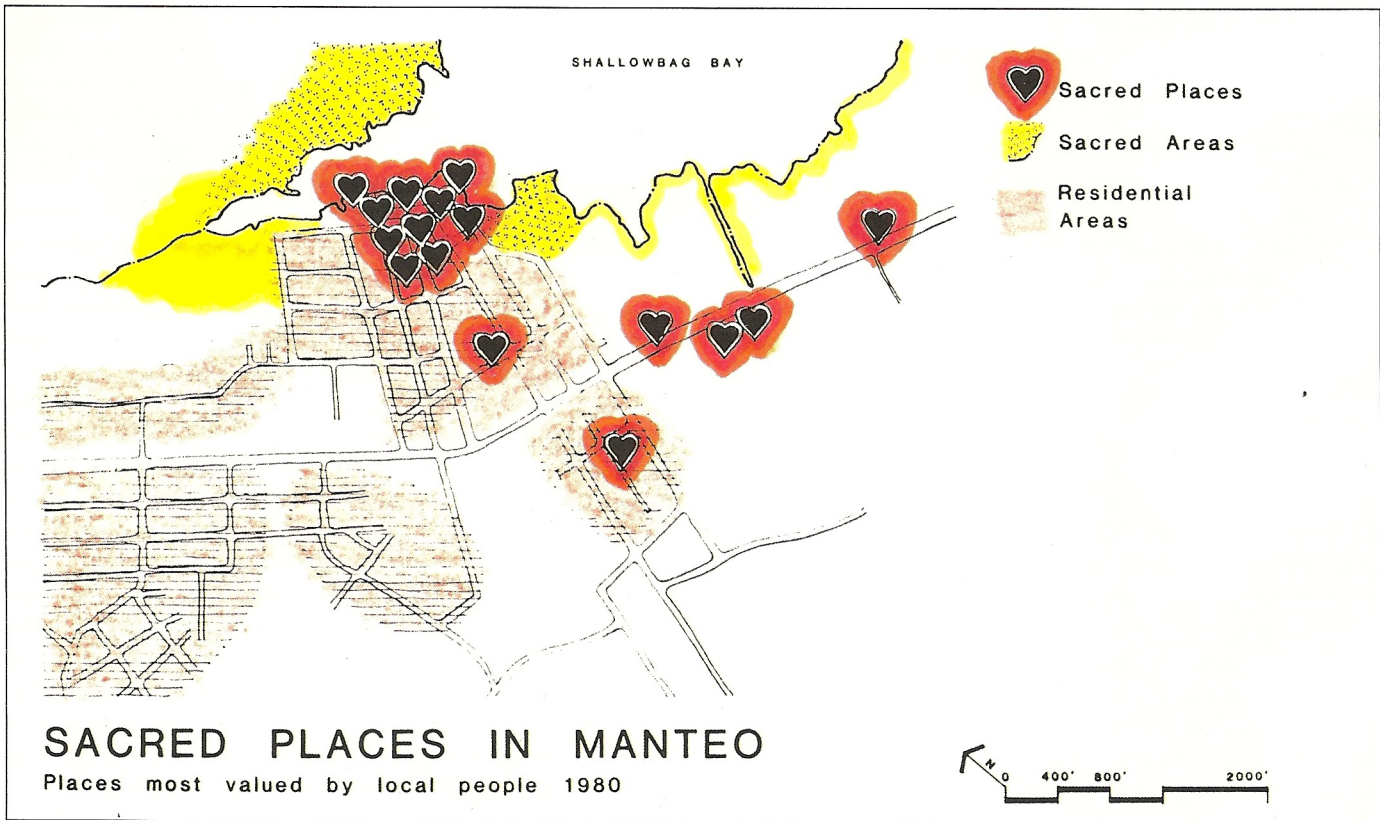
With Manteo's unemployment rate running higher than any in the state, the mayor and town commissioners

desperately wanted to build a new economic base. The obvious solution was for the village to capitalize on its quaint layout on Roanoke Sound, in hopes of attracting tourists. Roanoke Island was already known as the site of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony. The National Park Service had established a Fort Raleigh Visitor Center on the undeveloped north end, and each summer a local theater company presented an outdoor musical about the colony's mysterious demise.

Hester's assignment was to design a layout of the waterfront that would entice developers to open inns and shops downtown. Everyone talked as if a tourist-based economy would eliminate all woes. But turning a workaday downtown into an upscale tourist district is no simple feat. And as Hester soon learned, residents were close-knit and proud, both of the island's history and of their blue-collar heritage.

"The reality of daily life just seemed blurred with the mythology of the place," he said. "It was an Andy Griffith-Mayberry community, except that people would talk about Sir Walter Raleigh as if they had just seen him sailing in the sound. After a month we began to get a sense that people weren't willing to sell the soul of the community, even for economic development."

He arranged for a class of design students to make activity maps by studying the way residents used various parts of town. And he noticed that the same residents passed his office several times a day. Many of them routinely met friends at a local cafe or drugstore fountain. "People would go to the post office and take an hour and a half to get their mail. They'd park at a gravel lot on the waterfront, then go check the water, then run into a friend



Randolph Hester's planning surveys of Manteo.

and end up going for coffee. They weren't downtown to get their mail; they were there for news."

It occurred to Hester that the townspeople might be underestimating their emotional ties to the plainer features of town, much as the Cambridge parents and teachers had underestimated their fondness for the old building that housed the day care center. "There are all sorts of social pressures to abandon the old in favor of new, shiny development," he said. "And we buy into them, whether we want to or not."

He began trawling for information about the most popular meeting spots and landmarks. He talked again and again with longtime residents, pushing them to describe their feelings about their favorite places. "Each of them would articulate little pieces of the sacred structure," he said. "I'd probe, and they'd send me in the right direction. It was difficult, because they didn't know themselves that the town had a sacred structure."

One frequently mentioned site was a waterfront park where, years before, commercial boats had tied up to refuel. A local man had erected a jagged cement cross there, culled from the rubble of a demolished elementary school. According to local legend, the cross miraculously appeared in the cement as a wall of the school was being pummeled by wrecking balls. Another site was the gravel parking lot on the old wharf, where each Christmas townspeople festooned a cedar tree with lights. Locals considered their hangouts at the cafe and the soda fountain to be precious, along with the public docks on the waterfront. Unadorned and run-down, these gathering points were exactly the kinds of places that would be destroyed by a wholesale redevelopment. Hester arranged for a community newspaper to run a survey about residents' attitudes toward specific town features, "and then things really started to gel."

Despite their deep desire for a stable economy, townspeople decided they did not want Manteo to be completely gentrified. Hester made a map of the downtown's most sacred places, then drafted a land-use plan restricting development at those sites. "I knew it would scare off most large developers," he said. "And it did. In accepting those limits, the residents gave up millions of dollars in potential income. But they managed to preserve the community's original character and flavor."

When Hester mapped the sacred structure of Manteo, he marked places of particular significance with a heart. He hoped—everyone hoped—that would be the end of it. When we draw maps to fix our position in the world—whether mentally, emotionally, or physically—we do so prayerful that the lines we set down will still be true next week, next year. We are often disappointed.

On a mild winter day the Manteo waterfront is deserted except for a pair of fiftyish women in docksiders and jogging suits eating ice cream on a bench. Sailboats and cabin cruisers ride a calm gray tide in the slips of a new marina. A boardwalk constructed twelve years ago, largely by local volunteers, leads past a new inn, the old gravel parking lot (now paved), a sandwich shop, a condominium complex with an interior courtyard and shops, and—hidden from the street by the

hulking condominium building—the park with the partly crumbled cement cross. Across a creek rocks a handsome replica of the three-masted bark that brought the first colonists from England. I go to the waterfront occasionally to eat lunch. Each time I find it pleasant, but not holy. It does not speak to me or anyone I know in any meaningful way.

Sadly, there is question whether the sacred structure of Manteo has proved strong enough over the past decade to withstand the forces of change. Locals still stroll the downtown streets, meeting neighbors on their way to the post office. But the docks where they gossiped are gone, replaced by the marina and a cramped public boat ramp on the out-of-the-way north end of downtown. The drugstore soda fountain burned some years back. Patrons have not taken to the fashionable ice cream parlor that replaced it. In a few years the post office may be forced by space limitations to move to the outskirts of town.

Few people remember Hester's map of sacred places.

Hester is now a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. He was clearly distressed when I told him of the changes along the Manteo waterfront. "The community worked so hard to prevent a tourist takeover," he sighed, "but the sense I'm getting is that the takeover happened anyway once they let down their guard." When I mentioned the post office's possible relocation, he curtly added, "That's what happens in most towns—they dismantle those centers of activity and then lament that the downtown is empty."

Yet even with its slicker countenance Manteo is beloved by my neighbors, who have lived here all their lives, and who will never live anywhere else. They hold in their minds a nostalgic map of past experience overlaid by the pragmatic map of the present. One shades the other. Neither dominates.

"Making an actual, physical map of something you feel in your heart can be quite a powerful experience," Randolph Hester told me, rather wistfully. And so I draw maps when I should be working, seeking to tap that power. Seeking to keep my bearings in a shifting world. I watch a flock of grackles invade the pines in my yard, and dream of Hatteras Island. As soon as I moved from there the sharp images I held of that landscape began to fade. Through the years many of the places I loved have been taken from me. The beach I called Ghost Crab Acres was sandbagged to slow erosion. The salt flats I nicknamed Stilt Field were flooded to attract ducks. An overgrown road where I went to spy on night-herons was sternly marked with NO TRESPASSING signs. Yet I map with those spots still prominent in my mind.

I map in concentric circles, my Roanoke Island home at the center. I place the barrier islands, eight miles to the east, an inch from my own bedroom, closer than the grocery store and jail that are just down the road. When I visit Hatteras, I tip my heart to the camel-hump dunes, the flooded marsh, the sandy ruts that lead to Pamlico Sound. Driving by, you would not know they held anything special at all. ●

Jan DeBlied is the author of two books about people and nature, Hatteras Journal and Meant to Be Wild: The Struggle to Save Endangered Species Through Captive Breeding.