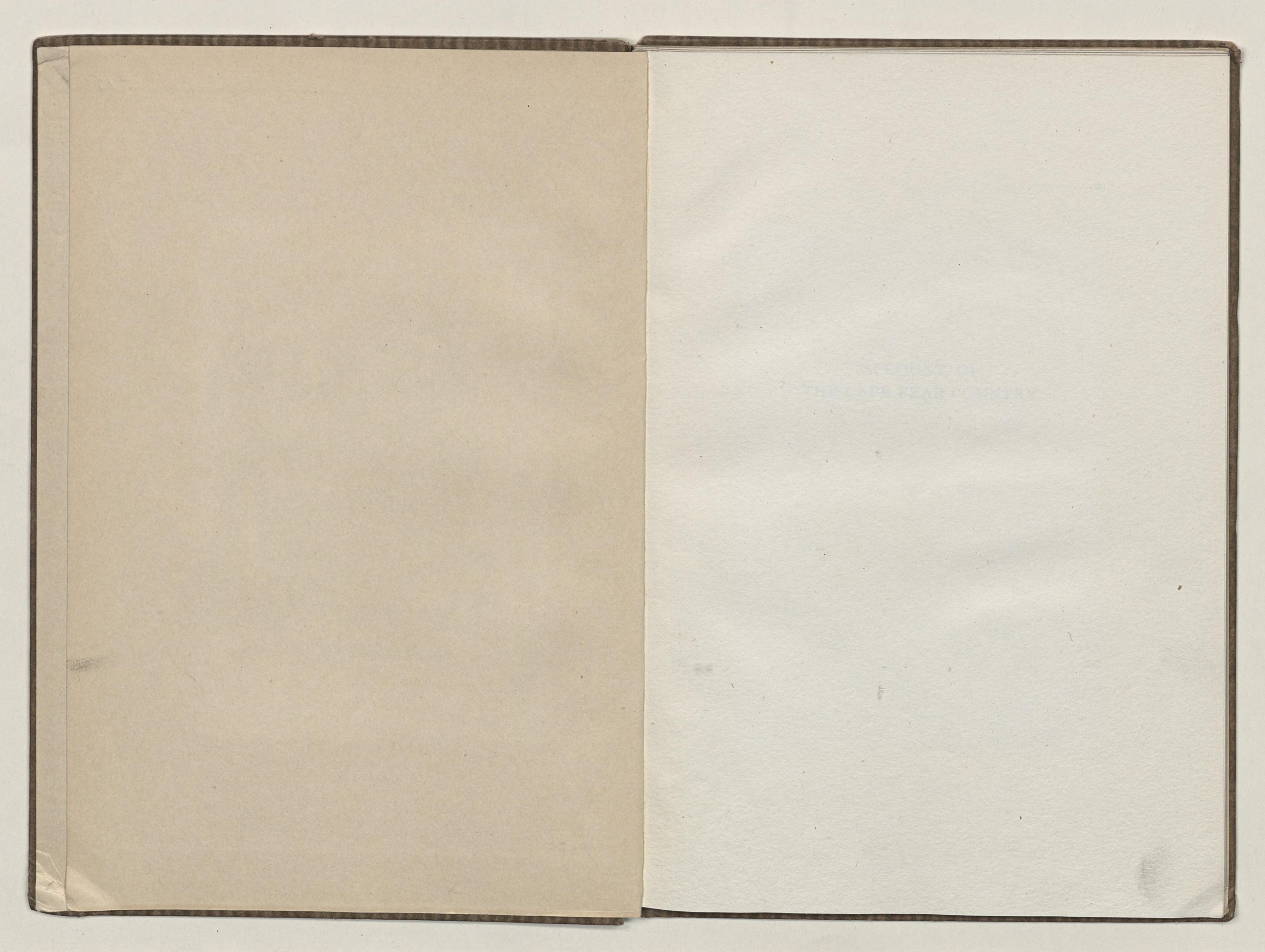


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ACCOUNT OF THE CAPE FEAR COUNTRY Heartman's Historical Series No. 36

AN ACCOUNT OF THE CAPE FEAR COUNTRY 1731

By Hugh Meredith

Edited by

EARL GREGG SWEM

Librarian of College of William and Mary

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INTRODUCTION

When Benjamin Franklin returned from London to Philadelphia in 1726, he accepted employment as a clerk in the dry goods house of Thomas Denham. He continued in this mercantile career for several months, until the death of Mr. Denham. Sometime in 1727 he began work again as a printer, this time as manager of Keimer's printing shop. He found among those employed by Keimer "Hugh Meredith, a Welsh Pennsylvanian, 30 years of age, bred to country work; honest, sensible, had a great deal of solid observation, was something of a reader, but given to drinking."

After a quarrel between Keimer and Franklin, a partnership in the printing business was formed by Franklin and Meredith in 1728. Meredith's father furnished the money to purchase the stock, and Franklin supplied the skill. The profits were to be divided equally. In speaking of their printing business, Franklin says, "I perceive that

I am apt to speak in the singular number, though our partnership still continued; the reason may be that in fact the whole management of the business lay upon me. Meredith was no compositor, a poor pressman, and seldom sober. My friends lamented my connection with him, but I was to make the most of it." . . . "Mr. Meredith, who was to have paid for our printing house, according to expectations given me, was able to advance only £100 currency, which had been paid; and 100 more were due to the merchant, who grew impatient and sued us all."

Some of Franklin's friends intimated to him that a dissolution of the partnership was desirable on account of Meredith's habits. In discussing their partnership, Meredith said, "I see this is a business I am not fitted for. I was bred a farmer and it was folly in me to come to town and put myself, at 30 years of age, an apprentice to learn a new trade. Many of our Welsh people are going to settle in North Carolina, where land is cheap. I am inclined to go with them and follow my old employment. If you will

take the debts of the company upon you; return to my father the £100 he has advanced; pay my little personal debts; and give me £30 and a new saddle; I will relinquish the partnership." . . . "I gave him what he demanded and he went soon after to Carolina, from whence he sent me next year two long letters containing the best account that had been given of that country, the climate, the soil, husbandry, etc.; for in those matters he was very judicious. I printed them in the paper and they gave great satisfaction to the public." (Franklin's Autobiography). Franklin and Meredith dissolved partnership July 14, 1730, but the dissolution was not publicly announced until May, 1732, when Franklin's debts had all been paid and he felt himself a free man.

The letters which Meredith wrote about North Carolina were printed in the Pennsylvania Gazette in the two issues dated Thursday, April 29 to Thursday, May, 6, 1731; and Thursday, May 6 to Thursday, May 13, 1731. The text of this reprint is from the file of the Pennsylvania Gazette in the Pennsylvania Gazette in the Pennsylvania

sylvania Historical Society, and it is through the courtesy of the officials of that society that I have been enabled to prepare a copy. The Pennsylvania Gazette, it will be remembered, was Franklin's paper, of which he was both proprietor and editor. Franklin gives no further account of Hugh Meredith, except in the short introduction to this account as it appears in the Pennsylvania Gazette; he refers to him as "a judicious and impartial person, who lately resided there some time." I have not been able to ascertain whether Meredith remained in North Carolina or returned to Pennsylvania.

The journey to this region was, of course, by sea. We have few descriptive accounts of the Cape Fear region of this period, about which Meredith writes. In his "Chronicles of the Cape Fear region, being some account of historic events on the Cape Fear River," Mr. James Sprunt has given a full survey of the literature of the subject with long extracts. It will be interesting for those who wish to compare Meredith's account, written about 1730 (or perhaps in the early part of 1731), with the account of a traveler in

1734, to consult the pages of Mr. Sprunt's book where the latter is printed under the caption, "A visit to Cape Fear in 1734." The text as it is given by Mr. Sprunt is from a reprint in the second volume of the Georgia Historical Society papers, pages 37 to 66. The full title of this publication from which the Account of 1734 is taken is "A new voyage to Georgia. By a young gentleman. Giving an account of his trip to South Carolina, and part of North Carolina. To which is added, A curious account of the Indians, By an honorable person. And a poem to James Oglethorpe, Esq., on his arrival from Georgia. London. Printed by J. Wilford, 1735." This is the title of the second edition.

There were Welsh emigrants from Pennsylvania and Delaware, who settled in the Cape Fear region in the decade 1730-1740, and later. An indication of this settlement is a tract of land still called the Welsh Tract, this designation appearing in the New Hanover county records as early as 1737. (See Ashe's History of North Carolina, v. I, p. 254.) It is likely that this was the settlement in which Hugh Meredith was interested.

I wish to acknowledge most gratefully the generous assistance of Mr. Charles Martel, Chief of the Catalog Division of the Library of Congress; and also to express my sincere appreciation to Colonel Samuel A. Ashe, of Raleigh, N. C., for his great interest in this little reprint and for his helpful suggestions.

E. G. Swem, William and Mary College.

THE CAPE FEAR COUNTRY

The new Settlement going forward at CAPE FEAR, having for these 3 or 4 years past, been the Subject of much Discourse, especially among Country People; and great numbers resorting thither contin-ually from this and the neighboring Provinces, merely to view the Place and learn the Nature of the Country, that they may be capable of judging whether it will probably be an advantageous Exchange if they should remove and settle there; and none having at their Return published their Observations for the Information of others; The following Account of CAPE FEAR (extracted from the private Letters of a judicious and impartial Person, who lately resided there some Time, and who had not the least Interest that might induce him either to commend or discomend the Country beyond strict Truth,) it is thought will not be unacceptable to a great Part of our Readers.

CAPE FEAR is the name Mariners give to a Spit of Sand which runs out to Sea on the East Side of the Mouth of Clarendon (commonly called Cape Fear) River and vulgarly gives name to a great Western Part of North Carolina, now called New Hanover Precinct: The Pitch or outward Point of the Cape is laid down to be in 33d. and 30m. N. Lat. and the Body of the Country lies to the northward of it, and runs westward on the Seashore about 80 miles, where it joins South Carolina; and eastward I know not how far, but I believe no great way. The Country in general is very low and level, especially back from the Rivers; the Swamps and Savanahs seem to be as low as the Rivers and are in fact very little higher. Most of the Country is well cloathed with tall Pines, excepting the Swamps, Savanahs, and some small Strips by the Sides of Rivers. The only Town they as yet have is Brunswick, seated on the River Clarendon, about 18 or 20 Miles from the mouth of it; having a com-

modious Place for Ships to lie safe in all Weathers, and is likely to be a Place of Trade, and the Seat of Government; tho' at present but a poor, hungry, unprovided Place, consisting of not above 10 or 12 scattering mean Houses, hardly worth the name of a Village; but the Platform is good and convenient, and the Ground high, considering the Country. There are several Rivers that water this Division or District: the westermost in a little River near South Carolina; then the Shilote River, and Lockard's Folly; these three enter the Sea at about 10 Miles Distance from each other; and are, by reason of Sand-Bars cross the Mouths of them, navigable but for Boats, Shallops, and the like small Craft. The next is Elizabeth River, which is but small and of no great Length, entering the great River Clarendon near the mouth.

This River Clarendon is esteemed the best for navigation of any along that Shore, even from the Capes of Virginia, to 80 or 100 Miles westward of Charlestown in South Carolina, as having the deepest Channel and easiest to find; yet with some Reason I am

inclin'd to believe, that there are in that Disance several as good if not better. However, 'tis certainly a noble River, the best and almost the only one of consequence in all North Carolina. It is about half a mile wide at Brunswick, and the Tide ebbs and flows between 3 and 4 Foot Neap Tides. Vessels of above 50 or 60 Tons English Make, cannot go above 6 or 8 miles above the Town; but small Craft may go 20 or 30; and much farther they might go, were it not for a multitude of Logs that have fallen into the Rivers, which are so heavy and solid that they lie at the bottom, and many of them show but little Appearance of Decay. This River divides it self about 10 Miles above the Town: the main Branch, which is by much the largest and runs by far the longest Course, is called the Northwest; and the other Northeast, up which I was about 50 Miles by Land, (by Water it was near 80) which took up two Days Walking; an Account of which will give you an Idea of the Country in general.

At our first setting out we had a sandy Pine Barren to walk in, which was covered

pretty thick with large Pine Trees, and underneath small Myrtle Bushes full of Berries, and some other small Bushes to me unknown, growing in a white sand, with a black sandy mould underneath; which when cleared yields a tolerable Crop of Indian Corn and Beans, but of Potatoes of the Bermudas sort, Squashes Pompions and the like, a vast Increase, as will the worst dry Land they have; though I cannot think of any Land of this kind lasting. We were not gone above a Mile before we came to some small Savanahs, which are grassy Plains having few or no Trees on them and are either wet or dry according to the Season; they were now very wet by reason of the Rains that had fallen a few Days before. These Savanahs are good Pasturage for Cattle; Beneath the Grass there is a fine black Mould, (in Some but thin, in others a very good Thickness) on a blueish white Clay. In moderately wet Summers they might make tolerable good Rice-Ground, as is done with the like in South Carolina. They are so well clay'd at bottom, that what Rain falls on them is a long while draining off. In

about 8 miles going, it was almost all Savanahs and one of them the Way we went, I think could be no less than 2 miles broad, and the Path I suppose was laid out the best way that could be without going very much about. The Water was mostly ancle-deep on them.

When we had pass'd these, we entered into Pine Land, at first but barren, but it soon grew better, and as it mended the Pines grew thinner, so that in a mile there was scarce any to be seen, but in their stead good Oak and Hickery, and the Land had small Ascents and Descents, with fine Runs of Water in the Vallies, passing among Limestone Rocks, which in their Qualities are much like those of Pennsylvania, only in this they differ, that these seem for the most part to be Oyster and other Shells cemented together; this is visible on the out side, but more to be seen when the Stones are broken, for then the several Kinds of Shell may be easily distinguish'd: Of these they make their best Hand-Milstones, and I believe may make good Water-Milstones, when they have such Mills to try them with. The Land

here was very good, and the second Best I saw in the Country; but it cannot be above 4000 or 5000 Acres, and is all settled. In this good Land we walk'd about 3 miles and cross'd the North East; after which the good land did not reach above 40 or 60 Perches. Then we entred Savanahs much such as those we had pass'd before, only the Water was not quite so deep, being seldom over our Shoes. Such was our Way for 7 or 8 miles, only here and there a narrow Strip of Pine Barren. Then we came to as good Land as ever I saw. When we came within This, the Pines were totally lost, and we had as fine a Wood to walk in as could be wished, of all the Sorts that are in Pennsylvania (Chestnut excepted,) besides several other Sorts to me unknown. The Land was a fine black Mould, in some Places on a whitish Clay, others on a rusty yellow, and some on a reddish or quite red Clay. The three last are counted the best; the other inclining to the Savanah Kind. There is plenty of Limestone here, such as the former, and good Water. Here I saw the finest Crop of Indian Corn I ever have seen; the Stalks of which measured 18 Foot long; and they told us,

that the year before that had 800 Bushels of Corn off 9 Acres of that Land, and expected then to have so much. This Piece of good Land may contain about 6 or 7000 Acres.

From hence we set out the next Day, and in a Course of 16 or 18 miles most of our Way was Savanahs, not so wet as those the Day before; and more Pine Barrens that look'd a little better than those we had before seen; and some Spots of good Land, the largest about 2 or 300 Acres; and some Rice Swamps. These Rice Swamps are flat, low Grounds, by the Sides of Rivers or Runs, generally well cloathed with tall Timber and Canes underneath; some with Trees only, others all Cane; Some are by Rivers or Runs where the Tide comes, these are overflow'd every high Tide; others are above the Tide either far up the Rivers, or at the Heads of Runs, (such were those in our Way,) they are hardly ever quite dry, nor ever so wet as to hurt the Rice, unless it be a very wet Time indeed. In clearing these Swamps, they first cut down the Cane, and all the small Underbrush, and gather it in Heaps; then fall the Saplins and great Trees; the

Branches of the Trees they generally lop off and burn with the Saplings, but let their Bodies lie and rot, the Logs being little minded because Rice is chiefly managed with the Hoe. They are most of them of a deep black Mould and are something Boggy. Towards night we got to the House of Mr. David Evans, late a Magistrate in New-Castle County upon Delaware: The Land he lives on is pretty good and the highest I saw in the Country, but there is only a small Body of it.

The next Day about Noon, we embark'd in a Canoo to return to Brunswick, accompanied by Mr. Evans and two others, having about 80 miles to row on the River Northeast, which is deep enough for a Sloop of 60 Tons all the Way, and would be navigable for such quite up to Mr. Evans's, were it not for the Multitude of Logs that lie in it, part of them fast in the Sand, with great Snags or Limbs, and sometimes either End or the Middle quite above, or but little beneath the Surface; and in some Places we saw whole Heaps jambed together, almost from Side to Side, and so firm that they are immovable,

being sound, heavy, fast and deep in the Sand, otherwise this would be a fine River, the Tide in a dry Time flowing some miles above Mr. Evans's. It is very crooked and deep, and from 10 to 15 Perches in the general Breadth of it. It is rare to find firm Land on both Sides, opposite; it being Swampy on one Side or the other, and often on both, and the Swamps very large, especially within 20 or 30 miles of its Entrance into Northwest. The water is of a dusky Complection, and looks much like high-coloured Malt Small-Beer, which is the general Hue of all the Waters, especially Rivers, of both North and South Carolina.

The Remainder in our next.

REMAINDER OF THE ACCOUNT OF CAPE FEAR

All the best of the Land on this River I have already, as well as I can, given you an Account of; but there is a pretty deal more of middling Sort; and yet there can be no great Quantity in any one Piece, nor yet any great number of these Spots. The course of this River, as well as of many other Rivers in these Countries, lies near the Sea; and I judge Mr. Evans's Place, before-mentioned, to be not above 12 or 16 miles from the main Ocean. There is another River which falls into the Northwest, on the East Side, about 12 miles above the Entrance of the Northeast; it is called Black River from the Duskyness of its Waters; Upon this Branch they say there are some considerable Tracts of very good Land, but it is not well discovered any great way up. The Northwest is the

most considerable Branch, as well for the Quantities of best Land, as for the Clearness of its Stream the Length of its Course, and the petrifying Quality of its Waters, which turn whole Heaps of Logs and entire Bodies of large Trees into solid Stone: I have seen some Pieces brought from thence, in which the Grain of the Tree was very plain even to the Heart, and seem'd to be young black or spanish Oak; but they are much too coarse and hard for Hones. The Banks of this Branch are high, the lowest Land on it, even the Swamps, being 12 or 16 Foot above the common Surface of the Water, and are as rich Land as can be, The good high Land, which hardly ever exceeds two miles wide from the River is in general from 30 to 40 Foot above the common Water, but some times in the height of the Freshes, there is very little of it dry: These Freshes are soon down off the high Land, but the Water remains some weeks on the lower grounds, to their great Detriment who would raise Corn Cattle or anything else. They happen more or less from the latter end of July to the beginning of October, in which Time there are commonly two or three of

them. Sometimes they come in March or April, but not so great or mischievous as the others. A Strong North-East Wind, is reckon'd a sure Presage of an approaching Inundation; and the fiercer and more lasting this Wind is the greater will be the Fresh: As it happened while I was in that Country when the Water rose, as some affirmed, 40 Foot perpendicular, but there were none that saw it who did not allow it to be upwards of 30.

There are several considerable Strips of good Land lying near the Sea-Shore westward of the mouth of Clarendon River, quite to the Borders of South Carolina, and on the Head of a large River call'd Wackamaw, which runs into South-Carolina; but all of it lies inconvenient for Water-Carriage, and Land Carriage to any considerable Distance is almost impracticable throughout the Country, by reason of the multitude of Swamps and wet Savanahs, which cannot be avoided.

The general way of taking up Land here, is to go to a surveyor, who is impowered to survey and give the Taker-up a Draught or

Plot of the same, and his Fees will be about 40s. or 31. a tract, which contains 640 Acres, and must be settled within two Years after taken up, otherwise it is free for another, who must be at the same Charge; but if it be settled within the Time limited, it may always be held, paying a Quit rent and Land-Tax. Land may also be purchased by Patent of some Gentlemen who dispose of it at 31. a Tract of 640 Acres, and no Time limited for the settling of it; but this Way of getting Land is generally disapprov'd and seldom practis'd, the Title not being thought so good; and people daily expect Persons with Power from the King to sell Lands on more easy and certain terms.

Excepting Chesnut Trees, here are all the Kinds you have in *Pennsylvania*, tho' but very few of Walnut; here are besides the Cypress, Laurel, Bay red and yellow, Live Oak and Swamp Oak, all Evergreens except the Cypress; with several Sorts whose Names I know not. Pheasants and Heath-hens here are none, but all other Fowl common with you are here. Parraquets in Summer, and greater Plenty of Turkeys than ever I saw

in Pennsylvania. Here are Foxes, Wolves, Wildcats. Possums, Raccoons, and Panthers always, and Bears sometimes in great Plenty; also Plenty of Deer, but Beavers here are none, nor any Ground-Squirrels, tho' plenty of Grey and Flying Squirrels: Alligators are very numerous here but not very mischievous; however on their Account Swimming is less practis'd here than in the Northern Provinces.

They have now at Brunswick Quarterly courts of Common Pleas, and Officers of the Peace, and begin to fall into something like a regular Common-weal: The Inhabitants are mostly such as were born or have lived in the neighboring Colonies; and This would be soon filled with them and others, were the Country less barren, and but tolerably healthful, (which it is far from): for one great Discouragement to settling this Place is now quite removed, to wit the Indians, who drove away or cut off those who attempted the settling it there several times, first the New England Men, then the Barbadians, and last my Countryman Thomas James, whose Settlement they plundered

and burnt, and murdered him and his Family. But now there is not an Indian to be seen in this Place; the Senekas, (who have always liv'd in Amity with the English) with their Tributaries the Susquehannah and Tuskarora Indians having almost totally destroy'd those called Cape Fear Indians, and the small Remains of them abide among the thickest of the South Carolina Inhabitants, not daring to appear near the out Settlements, for the very name of a Seneka is terrible to them, as indeed it is to most of these southern Indians: So that, I cannot but think both the Carolinas as safe as any of the English Colonies on the Main from any future Indian War.

During the Winter I resided at Black River in Winyaw, South Carolina, near 100 miles West of Brunswick; where we had not a white Frost so hard as to kill the Leaves of the Tobacco Suckers in general, till the beginning of November; and the latter Part of that Month, and most of December was much like the Pennsylvania October; and the latter Part of December and all January even to the second of February, was much

such like Weather as is common at Philadelphia, before the Fair, the ground not frozen two inches deep, and the People begin to look for Spring as you do in *March*. Here was neither Snow nor sleet all Winter, and I believe the Weather has been much the same at *Cape Fear*.

To conclude, in the Country I have been describing, the cheapest Goods imported are 50 per cent. dearer than at *Philadelphia*, and most things 100 per cent. dearer, as Rum, Ozenbrigs, etc. Their own Produce is cheap, and there is plenty of Provisions for as many as can settle, but there is not Land enough in the whole Country for as many Inhabitants as are now in *Bucks County* in *Pennsylvania*.

