



TOPSAIL ISLAND

Mayberry by the Sea

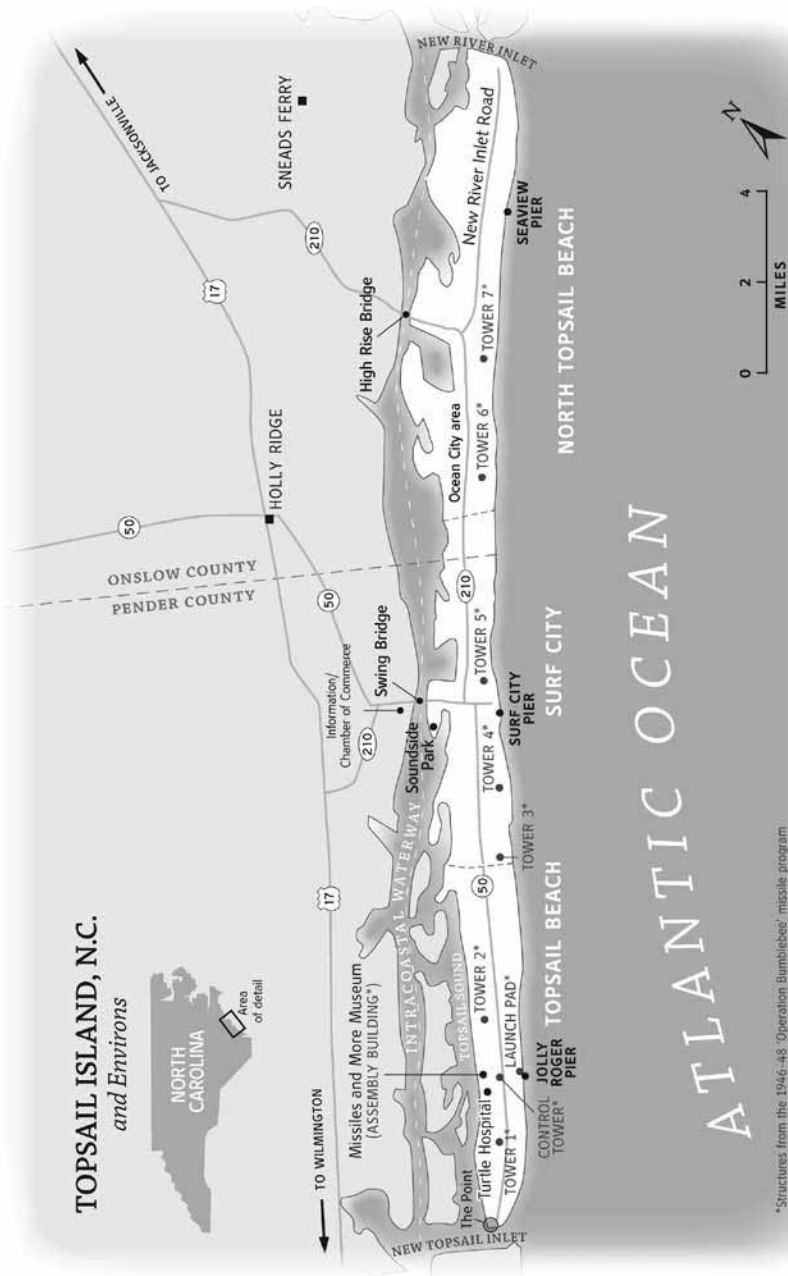
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TOPSAIL ISLAND, N.C. and Environs



*Structures from the 1946-48 'Operation Bumblebee' missile program

Preface

When first I saw Topsail Island, it looked like the surface of the moon. The year was 1996, and Hurricanes Bertha and Fran had just hit. Fran, especially, had been unkind.

My parents lived in Wilmington, North Carolina, about a 45-minute drive away. My father, a semi-retired insurance inspector, took my family up to view some of what he had seen. What he had seen was devastation: buildings knocked down, beaches eroded, homes tossed about as if they were Pick-up Sticks. We drove through the new town of North Topsail Beach, hardest hit, now more beach than town. Virtually nothing stood. Most of the damaged homes had been bulldozed. Piles of building materials remained to be carried away. Many piles had been cleared already.

Growing up, I had seen ghost towns in Arizona—entire communities left empty when a mine ran out. Street after street of houses remained, but each home was empty. With no buyers available, the occupants had simply left. In a sense, Topsail seemed even more surreal. A town had been here, clearly, but little more could be seen. When we could drive no farther, blocked by blown sand, we got out of the car and walked. The outlines of streets were visible, but the streets themselves were hidden. It was as if a tarp of sand had been draped over the island. Mother Nature had reclaimed what was hers.

I was not to see Topsail for nine more years. Our oldest daughter, Lindsay, her husband, Micah, and their newborn daughter, Riley, visited while returning from my parents' in

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the summer of 2004. They stopped at Topsail Beach, stayed in a motel, loved the island, and persuaded all of us to return the following summer.

In August 2005, then, we all returned—Vicki and I; Lindsay, Micah, and Riley; our son Ryan; our youngest daughter, Jamie, and Jamie’s boyfriend. Behind our rental house were inland waters off the Intracoastal Waterway, which parallels the ocean. Off to the east—and we could see this from the same second-story deck—was the ocean.

The north end of the island had been rebuilt by now. But it was the island’s calm and serenity, not the continual building, that we found striking. The waves and the breeze. A beautiful beach of white sand. The casual pace. Friendly people. Small shops. We found a breakfast place. Lindsay and Micah had discovered it the year before.

Topsail reminded me of visits years ago to my grandparents’ home on Brigantine, New Jersey, a quaint island north of Atlantic City—quaint until gambling moved into Atlantic City and the moneyed crowds moved to Brigantine. It reminded me, too, of Nags Head on North Carolina’s Outer Banks, which I visited years later with a college girlfriend’s family. Nags Head had been small and slow paced and unassuming, not yet discovered by hordes of tourists, developers, and businesses. But Nags Head, like Brigantine, was all in the past now. There was no place like that anymore.

Yet here was Topsail. I went home and wrote about it. I write a column for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and the response to this column was unusual. I received dozens of e-mails, calls, and letters, odd in themselves for a column about a mere place and not an issue or person. Many were from Virginia, of course, but a good many were from Topsail or elsewhere in North Carolina. Second, nearly everyone said I had perfectly described the allure of Topsail—not a particularly

Preface

difficult task, I remember thinking. How tough is it to describe a paradise? Many with a history at Topsail told me their own stories. Finally, and I initially thought this was just hyperbole until the examples began to pile up, several politely asked me to write no more about Topsail. They begged me not to let the cat out of the bag.

The cat, I was pretty sure, had long since escaped. Everywhere we had gone on Topsail, houses and duplexes were being built. So I was taken by the notion that Topsail needed to be written about, and soon, while it was still Topsail. During the week at the beach, I had gone looking for a book to describe the allure of Topsail. I wanted something to read in a few days on the beach. I found a solid history of the island, but I was looking for something that would tell me why I liked this place. Now, readers were telling me the same thing. They wanted that book.

Among the many who e-mailed me was the head of the chamber of commerce for the Topsail area. A few back-and-forth exchanges led to my planning return trips to the island—one more in the summer and three in the fall and early winter. He lined up contacts, who in turn lined up others, who in turn lined up others. I also interviewed some of my original readers in Virginia.

In the end, I talked to more than 50 people—many of whom Vicki photographed for this book—before simply cutting things off. One or two islanders had to warm to the idea of talking to me, seemingly seeing me, I thought, as Native Americans once viewed soul-stealing photographers. I was after the island's soul, it was true, but I certainly meant it no harm. Of those 50-plus people, all but two ended up being warm, engaging, and sharing. That would prove typical of the island. Where else would you get a 96 percent helpfulness ratio?

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In the end, this became a book of my observations, steered by the stories of others.

It is not a history book. Island history comes in through the side door, not the front door. Topsail, for instance, has a significant military history that is dispensed with quickly here. The interested reader would do well to check the books of local historian David A. Stallman.

And it is not a book of stories either. The stories within these pages are good ones, but more important is what they convey of the island's life. The selection of stories, I should say, was a combination of happenstance and arbitrary decision making. I can't help thinking that many will read this book and wonder what elevated these stories above their own. Everybody will believe he or she has stories that are just as good and just as meaningful and maybe more deserving. They're right. That's one of the wonderful things about living on Topsail Island.

Throughout the planning, researching, and writing of this book, I have always kept one question in mind: What is the allure of Topsail?

I hope you feel the answer.



CHAPTER ONE

Mayberry by the Sea

*S*unsets on Topsail Island are worth the wait. The sun moves deliberately, as everything does on the island, reaching for the water of the sound but in no particular hurry to get there. A boat motors by. Sea gulls cry.

The sunlight begins to fracture as it nears the water, more so if the day is cloudy. Yellows and oranges extend through the sky, slowly at first, then rapidly filling the horizon. The blue-green water, initially a counterpoint, now catches fire from the sky, merging into a full-screen panorama of orange. An onlooker has to squint. All is brightness, beauty, color.

Moments later, it is gone.

Blackness nearly consumes the sky now,

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interrupted by only a white-yellow moon. Across the narrow island, just a few hundred yards away, nature has prepared an encore. The fortunate need walk only a half-dozen blocks from Topsail Sound along the narrow streets thinly dusted by sand, up and over the decking that crosses the protective dunes, then down the steps. The view is to the east now, over the Atlantic Ocean. Moonlight bathes the beach and the incoming surf. Waves form, merge with one another, and roll toward the beach. Each momentarily commands the moon's spotlight as its fate is determined, either reaching the shore or being submerged by returning waves that have already made the journey.

Enough waves survive that their crashes on the beach are in rhythm every few seconds, the concussive downbeats to a tune played out by the sea.

An ocean breeze accompanies.

The sea mist joins in.

The enrapturing soft breeze, the ever-so-slight mist, the rhythmic sounds of the surf—they combine to wrap you in something so distinctive that when you experience a similar feeling days or weeks or even months later, in another place, perhaps on another beach, you will think of Topsail.

Topsail Island is a small barrier island off the North Carolina coast south of the Outer Banks and north of Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach. The map shows Topsail—pronounced “TOP-sul” by those who have been here more than once—to be pencil thin. Indeed, it is not much more. There are only 15 square miles on this 26-mile-long strip of sand. The width is rarely much more than a half-mile and sometimes only 200 yards, providing a splendor of almost incomprehensible logistics: morning sunrises over water followed, nearby, by evening sunsets over water. Did the Great Island Creator make a mistake? Was Topsail supposed to get both?