

Sailing the *Elizabeth II*

Aboard the *Elizabeth II*, modeled after the 16th-century sailing vessel that brought the colonists to Roanoke Island, one writer finds himself buoyed by excitement and history.

By Bryan Oesterreich

I arrived at the dock on Silver Lake in Ocracoke just after dawn carrying my duffel bag, cameras, and a cup of steaming coffee. Although it was still very early, a small crowd had already gathered at the dock to take in the hustle and bustle involved in preparing the *Elizabeth II*, a 16th-century replica sailing vessel, for sail across the Pamlico Sound toward Bath — and I had been invited to come aboard.

While the crew was engaged in some of the same duties their forefathers handled hundreds of years ago, some tasks — like checking the weather radar and loading up coolers of ice, beverages, and food — were more current. Captain Robbie Putnam, a youthful but seasoned sailor, welcomed me aboard the ship with a smile.

After our crew had boarded, the *Remora*, a Zodiac-style chase boat, was set off to help Captain Putnam navigate the ship into deeper water. A camera crew in a chartered fishing boat circled in anticipation. Finally, Captain Putnam gave the command to remove all dock lines. He engaged the ship's diesel engines (back in the 1500s, ships like the *Elizabeth II* didn't have the luxury of engines to assist in leaving port), and we moved away from the dock. The assembled well-wishers waved and flashbulbs lit up the morning mist.

Building a boat

Between 1584 and 1587, a fleet of seven sailing vessels carried the colonists to Roanoke Island — ships much like the *Elizabeth II*. Fast-forward to 1980. On a visit to Boston, Governor James B. Hunt Jr. noticed the attention visitors were giving to the U.S.S. *Constitution* docked in the harbor. He thought that North Carolina needed a sailing vessel of its own to celebrate its history and help draw visitors to the coast.

Mindful that the 400th anniversary of the first colonists' visits to Roanoke Island was approaching, Hunt took his idea to North Carolina's 400th Anniversary Committee. Funding for the project would come from the private sector. What better place to build such a vessel than Roanoke Island?

One year later, a boat designer, William Avery Baker, and a builder, O. Lie-Nielsen, were selected, and in July 1982, construction of the *Elizabeth II* began in Manteo at the Creef-Davis Boathouse on the banks of Shallowbag Bay. Twelve craftsmen were enlisted to build and rig the *Elizabeth II*.

The logistics for building a replica of a 16th-century sailing vessel were challenging. A blacksmith shop was set up. A portable sawmill was brought in, because of the large amount of wood that was needed. A unique "ships saw" was sent to the site. And the designer would try to replicate methods used by boatbuilders hundreds of years ago.

The Elizabeth II would, when completed, be a replica of a typical three-mast, square-rigged sailing vessel, made to look as much as possible like those used hundreds of years ago. The carpenters made a few modern concessions, however, to make the boat more accommodating to crew and visitors of today; they added headroom below decks and installed current navigational and communication electronics.

For the next 16 months, residents and visitors to Manteo watched the ship take shape under the canopy at the boatyard. Frames were built and put in place. Planking was secured piece by piece. All the ship's rigging was made from scratch. And on November 22, 1983, a full four months ahead of schedule, the ship was christened by the governor's wife.

Set sail

On my trip aboard the Elizabeth II, we reached the Pamlico Sound in minutes, escorted by pleasure boats and commercial fishermen. Captain Putnam checked his depth finder, gently turned the ship in a southerly direction, and navigated the shallow channel as Ocracoke grew smaller off the stern rail. As I turned back toward the bow, I tried to imagine how brave those first settlers were to board and sail on such a relatively small vessel across the mighty Atlantic Ocean.

When we cleared the first marker buoy, Captain Putnam, at the helm, reached for his VHF marine radio. He spoke for a minute, then turned to me. "We've got a ferry coming our way," he said. It was the Swan Quarter to Ocracoke ferry. The channel we were navigating was shallow and narrow enough to demand Putnam's full attention, for the Elizabeth II draws eight feet of water and state ferries are very wide.

Within minutes, the ferry motored past us with everyone on board waving. It struck me as an interesting dichotomy — a 16th-century sailing vessel passing a very large and modern ferry. The VHF radio crackled as the ferry captain complimented the Elizabeth II. When the ferry was safely past, Captain Putnam gave the orders to "set some sails." The all-volunteer crew scrambled over the decks, singing a sea chantey while they worked.

"A piece of living history"

While it was christened in November 1983, it wasn't until September 19, 1985, that the Elizabeth II first set sail. Since the ship wouldn't be fitted with diesel engines until years later, it was towed by a state tug, The Albemarle, until it reached the sound. WRAL-TV of Raleigh donated \$20,000 to help fund the trip. The station also dispatched its news helicopter to record the action. Along with the volunteer crew, some of the craftsmen who built the Elizabeth II were on board for its maiden voyage.

After putting the ship through a few practice maneuvers, Captain Horace Whitfield issued the orders to hoist the upper sails, and the ship and crew headed for Ocracoke. The next day, they would sail to Beaufort (and later to New Bern) to participate in celebrations to honor the ship.

While thousands of people have visited the Elizabeth II at its home port in Manteo, very few have had the opportunity to sail aboard the ship and witness the crew setting the sails. I have

some modest sailing experience with a single-mast sloop where I could raise my sails in a matter of minutes. Setting sails on the Elizabeth II was a completely different experience — choreography on the sound.

Crew members ascended the rigging on both masts and spread out across the yardarms using only a single line beneath them on which to stand. When they were spaced out appropriately, First Mate John Vang gave the order to set the sails. Each crew member then unfastened the ribbons to let the sail unfurl, while crew on deck kept steady hands on other lines to ensure the sails were correctly set. When unfurled, the sails then had to be trimmed and secured. Captain Putnam demonstrated his dry sense of humor by graciously suggesting I go aloft to the crow's nest to get a better "feeling" for the operation. I, even more graciously, declined.

When the lower sails were set, Captain Putnam shut down the diesels. Instantly, the constant shuddering of the large engines went silent. We were under sail! The ship caught a good breeze, heeled a bit, and settled into her point of sail. Crew members applauded.

During our breezy and sunny sail across the sound, Scott M. Stroh III, director of Roanoke Island Festival Park, sat with me on deck, cradled his lunch in his lap, and talked about the importance of the Elizabeth II. "We've created a piece of living history," says Stroh. "People of all ages can come aboard and see and feel an important part of our past. The educational opportunities on board are remarkable." Stroh also says he most enjoys seeing folks come aboard, then watching them as their eyes light up. "That's what it's all about for me."

My plan was to stay aboard until we anchored in the Pamlico River, close to Bath Creek. But, by the time we reached the mouth of the Pungo River, we were losing light, so the Captain decided to locate safe anchorage nearby and sail into Bath the next morning. He also knew I wanted to board a Grady-White sponsored photo boat in Bath, to get some photos of the Elizabeth II being escorted into harbor. He got me ashore by using the Remora we had towed behind us across the sound. In two-to-three-foot seas, I climbed out a gun port and into the bouncing inflatable boat. As we headed to shore, I looked back at the stately ship, saw the crew waving, and knew I'd never forget the trip. Nor would it be my last.

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