



Preserving the Mystery: An Administrative History of Fort Raleigh National Historic Site

Cameron Binkley, Steven Davis

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In 1916, Congress passed the “Organic Act” that created the National Park Services (NPS). The act provided the basis needed to better manage the nation’s already existing and growing assortment of federally protected lands by placing these under the direct supervision of a national bureau. More important, the Organic Act established the essential tenets of faith that have long guided NPS policy. According to the act, the Park Service seeks “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife” within the parks and “to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Under the sponsorship of Sir Walter Raleigh, English settlers established two colonies on Roanoke Island, North Carolina, in 1585 and 1587, respectively. The colonists from the first settlement returned to England, while the men, women, and children from the second settlement simply disappeared, thus becoming known to history as the “lost colony.” Despite initial failure and tragedy, these expeditions fueled and aided future colonization attempts by England, including the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, the first permanent English settlement in the New World. Many generations accepted the northern shore of Roanoke Island as the location for the famous “Cittie of Raleigh.” The site was thus the focus of various commemorative efforts over the years. In the 1890s, the Roanoke Colony Memorial Association (RCMA) was formed to preserve the area. During the 1930s, the State of North Carolina administered the site as a state park and developed a highly conjectural reconstruction of log structures as a New Deal work project. During the same period, local enthusiasts formed the Roanoke Island Historical Association (RIHA), which took over the preservation and commemorative work of the RCMA. Over the years, Fort Raleigh’s managers have focused largely on preserving and recovering the site’s archeological data, interpreting the area’s history to the public, and managing the park’s unique partnership with RIHA. Since 1990, that mission has also included promoting greater understanding of Civil War-era events on Roanoke Island, the history of the island’s indigenous inhabitants, and even the area’s role in the development of early radio. This study of Fort Raleigh National Historic Site focuses upon its administrative history. This administrative history documents how Fort Raleigh National Historic Site was created and later managed by the Park Service. It discusses how NPS managers have sought to accommodate commercial and community interests while maintaining their own basic allegiance to the standards of professional scholarship and the directives of the NPS Organic Act. Within this study emphasis is placed upon the years of NPS administration, but a review of the site’s historical importance is also included.

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