

## **Pamlico County**

*For those who seek a hands-on life experience within a natural framework, this coastal county has much to offer — as a year-round residence or a home-away-from-home.*

**By Bryan A. Oesterreich**

While western North Carolina provides residents and visitors with rustic log cabins and dramatic mountain vistas, eastern North Carolina is a destination for those who love wide-open spaces and soothing expanses of water. Pamlico County — made up of about 340 square miles of land and about 225 square miles of water — has an abundance of both.

The Pamlico Sound provided an entry point for the English explorers who “discovered” the area in the late 1500s. But the large English vessels found the shallow sound difficult to navigate, and settlement didn’t begin in earnest for another century. Of course, the area now known as Pamlico County wasn’t discovered by the English at all — it was occupied by American Indian tribes, including the Secotan and Pamouick, for thousands of years. Initial relations between European settlers and American Indians were good.

As more and more settlers arrived, however, tensions increased. These tensions escalated and resulted in the Tuscarora War of 1711-1713, which saw four tribes unite against the encroaching settlers. The tribes were defeated, and by the middle of the 18th century, no distinct tribes remained in the area. Colonization forged ahead, and in 1872, Pamlico County was formed from parts of Beaufort and Craven counties.

### **Industrious by nature**

Interestingly, those who chose to settle in Pamlico County in the 19th century engaged in many of the same occupations as those who now live here. Timber, fishing, and farming were mainstays of life, then as now, and many of the challenges of those livelihoods remain unchanged. Weather along the Coastal Plain can be idyllic one day and treacherous the next, creating hardship for those who work the fields and the sound. The county contains more than 133,000 acres of forest land, much of it yellow pine. Within this acreage are 47,000 acres of forest industry land, where trees are harvested and replanted. It’s unusual to ride through the county without spotting a least a handful of logging trucks.

Like the loggers, Pamlico County’s farmers cover a lot of territory on their bright green-and-yellow John Deere tractors — more than 50,000 acres altogether. Most of this land is divided among family farms. The 67 farms in Pamlico County average just over 750 acres each. Soybeans, corn, cotton, and wheat are the most popular crops, but potatoes, hay, and tobacco are also grown. In 2001, agricultural products brought more than \$15 million into the county.

On Big M Farms in Vandemere, Pat McCotter grows mostly potatoes, just as his father did before him. Pat’s wife, Amy, his daughter, Kim, and sons, David and Johnnie, all

work for the family business. Pat McCotter admits that weather and fluctuating prices can test the mettle of farmers. But he also loves his work. “Farming is the greatest life in the world,” he says.

### **Fishy business**

Boat design and fishing technology have changed the lives of commercial fishermen during the past two centuries, but the catches haven’t changed. Hearty mariners work not only the Pamlico Sound, but the Atlantic Ocean as well. Crab boats and trawlers aren’t as glamorous as the charter fishing boats, but they bring in the fish. More than a dozen species are caught and sold; the most popular among them are crabs, flounder, shrimp, and mullet. When a boat fills its holds, it heads to shore to sell the catch. Packing houses buy, clean, package, and ship the fish to markets up and down the East Coast.

Carroll Voliva, owner of Carroll’s Seafood in Vandemere, was born and raised just down the sandy lane from his waterfront fish house. He remembers when trains were used to ship seafood caught in the sound. “They used to pack the fish in barrels, ice them down, and send them north,” he says. The introduction of refrigerated trucks reduced both shipping costs and time. “Seafood needs to get to market as quickly as it can,” he says. Voliva should know — he frequently ships local flounder to Japan, where it reaches Japanese sushi markets in three days.

Commercial fishing continues to play a major economic role. According to marine biologist Alan Bianchi of the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, more than \$12 million was generated in 1996. But unpredictable factors, such as the weather and the number of commercial boats fishing, can adversely affect revenue. Last year, the county’s fishing revenue dropped to \$6 million.

### **Down East downtime**

Carroll Voliva’s son, Greg, runs a business of his own, Four Seasons Guide Service. Whether clients wish to hunt or fish, Greg can accommodate. “We have, right here in Pamlico County, some of the best duck hunting on the East Coast,” he says. Clients have traveled from as far south as Florida and as far north as Pennsylvania to engage in their favorite sport. “Sometimes we’ll do some fishing on Monday, then head for a duck blind on Tuesday,” he says. “And it seems like the more pressure a client faces in the office, the more they enjoy getting out in nature for a while.”

Pamlico County may attract outdoor sports enthusiasts, but it also attracts those who study the flora and fauna. Kim Fennema, a former oceanographic operations coordinator at the University of Miami, “semi-retired” to Vandemere Creek in Mesic with her husband, Robert, to write, work as a freelance photographer — her work has been featured in *Our State* — and sail aboard their cutter-rigged ketch, *Camelot*. “Vandemere is a sleepy little fishing village,” she says. “But after 15 years in the insanity of Miami, this place provides us with the basic values we had been missing.”

Twenty miles south of Vandemere lies Oriental, Pamlico County's most populated community. The town boasts a rich maritime history and a wealth of opportunities for those who enjoy life on and near the water.

The quiet fishing village was once a bustling port city served by two steamships and train service from New Bern. In the 1900s, Oriental's population was 2,000. Then along came the trucking industry and the Great Depression. The population has settled down to around 900 residents, many of whom are artists, philosophers, and retirees from all over the world.

Since more than 2,700 sailboats inhabit the creeks and bays in and around Oriental, many Tar Heel residents — and even some folks from out of state — have obviously decided to make the village their weekend destination. Small wonder, as the Pamlico Sound provides some of the best protected-water sailing in the country. Numerous regattas are scheduled for spring, summer, and fall, and a variety of dockage options are available for those wishing to do so. Inexperience need not be an obstacle — sailing lessons are available for everyone from beginners to old salts who wish to sharpen their skills.

For those who'd like to be a little closer to the water and propel themselves rather than rely on the wind, there's kayaking. The sport has grown tremendously in the last few years. Eastern North Carolina has more than 1,200 miles of mapped kayak "trails," several hundred of which are in Pamlico County.

One resource for the kayak experience is Paddle Pamlico. Al and Karen Privette's store, located across from the docked shrimp trawlers, can supply all the equipment one needs to explore the almost endless creeks and bays near Oriental. "Families are really discovering kayaking," Al says. "And now we have kayaks that can be propelled with your feet and even some that allow a small sail."

Pamlico County has become not only a destination for hunters, sailors, and kayak enthusiasts, but for campers — especially young campers. Five camps in Pamlico County draw thousands of campers every year from all across the country and many foreign countries. Two of the camps, Sea Gull and Seafarer, are YMCA camps that employ 600 staff members and can host 1,400 campers. The most popular activities are boating and sailing on the sound — some programs even venture across the sound to Ocracoke Island.

### **Water ways**

Just downstream from Oriental is Gum Thicket, a peninsula named for its lush and thick surrounding forest. Ground has been broken on an ambitious community, River Dunes, a projected \$40 million development being built on 1,300 acres. When completed, the community will contain 550 upscale homes and a 400-slip, man-made marina. Developers and county officials have spent several years working out the intricate environmental details faced by any waterfront development. Permits had to be obtained from 26 state and federal agencies. Projections show an increase of \$279 million to the county's tax base.

Those who choose to relocate to the area, as well as current residents, will soon have what many have been waiting for — an expanded heritage center in nearby Grantsboro. The Pamlico Historical Association is negotiating with state officials to add a museum space to the current visitor's center. The museum will house artifacts, historical documents, and genealogy records.

George Peacock, association member and retired schoolteacher, is excited about the project. "We've made a lot of progress," he says. "Our membership keeps growing. We're going to see this through."

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