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History Derailed, or, the libel of James Cook.

<http://blog.ncmaps.org/history-derailed-libel-james-cook/>

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Tags: James Cook

Eighteenth Century South Carolina surveyor James Cook has been dead for over 200 years. Let's make believe he's still living and still surveying. What else would he be doing? He'd be suing several late 20th and early 21st century writers and publishers for libel. His case would be a slam dunk. Let's examine the evidence of libel and then the facts.

The Evidence

Exhibit A:¹ *Surveyors again tackled the task of continuing the old 1734-1736 line. Through errors (intentional or not is not known), North Carolina surveyor, James Cook, finally drew a line eleven miles south of “His Majesty’s intention.” Confused, fatigued, and suffering from “the rains, the hot weather and the insects”, the surveyor stopped on the Camden – Salisbury road, south of the Catawba lands. Instead of latitude 35 degrees, the surveyors had run a course of 34 degrees and 49 minutes. The error cost South Carolina 660 square miles of land.*

Exhibit B:² *James Cook from North Carolina took on the task but, distracted by “the rains, the hot weather and the insects”—or so he claimed—ran the line 11 miles south of the thirty-fifth degree, which was the intended boundary, and thus took 660 square miles from South Carolina for the benefit of his own state.*

Exhibit C: A few years ago, a traveling exhibit, “The Shaping of South Carolina: A Story of Adventure, Politics and Boundary Making”, included in its descriptive text a statement that surveyor James Cook was responsible for the error that placed the east–west segment of the 1764 North Carolina/South Carolina boundary survey 11 miles too far south. The immediate source for the exhibit’s information was...

Exhibit D.

Exhibit D:³ *For whatever reason, the line ended at 34°49′, a critically important event that shaped the outline of the future states. There the matter rested for twenty–seven years until 1764, when North Carolina surveyor James Cook headed west from the last ending point. Why he did not follow “His Majesty’s intention” and move up to the thirty–fifth parallel is unclear... Placing this section of the line too far south cost South Carolina more than six hundred square miles.*

Exhibit E:⁴ *In another essay on the Cook survey confusion, Pettus states, ‘Surveyor, James Cook, finally drew a line 11 miles south of His Majesty’s intention. Confused, fatigued and suffering from the rains, the hot weather and the insects, the surveyor stopped on the Camden – Salisbury Road, south of the Catawba lands. Instead of latitude 35 degrees, the surveyors had run a course of 34 degrees and 49 minutes. The error cost South Carolina 660 square miles of land.’ James Cook probably had had enough of the heat and chiggers and headed for the more sublime environs of Cook’s Mountain, elevation 372 feet above sea level.*

The Facts

Fact 1: This James Cook was not a “North Carolina surveyor”, at least not in the sense of his employment. He was a South Carolina surveyor who surveyed part of North Carolina at the request of the South Carolina governor (more on that later).

Fact 2: Cook was *not* part of the 1764 boundary survey team. The 1764 survey team that placed the east–west segment of the boundary eleven miles too far south included the following surveyors: James Moore, George Pawley, Samuel Wyly, and Arthur MacKay.⁵ The reason behind their latitudinal error remains unknown, but if blame must be assessed, start with those names instead of James Cook. Also present at the erecting of the stake marking what the surveyors deemed to be the 35th

parallel of latitude were Samuel Spencer, Morgan Brown, Nicholas Bond, Samuel Davis, William Coward, William Hardick, and John Stewart, as shown on what is presumably a contemporary copy of the 1764 boundary survey in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill:⁶



A portion of the 1764 boundary survey between North Carolina and South Carolina, in the North and South Carolina Boundary Survey, #2944-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Fact 3: Cook wasn't even in the Carolinas when the 1764 boundary survey was performed! In 1764, Cook was in the Royal Navy, serving as master of the British frigate, the *Alarm*.⁷ During most of 1764 and 1765, the *Alarm* and its crew were in the West Indies and along the Gulf Coast of Florida, especially Pensacola Bay. Fortuitously, they did make a brief visit to Port Royal, SC, during the last two weeks of August, 1764.⁸ The two week anchorage at Port Royal was Cook's only visit to the Carolinas until he settled in South Carolina, probably in the latter half of 1766 or the early part of 1767. By the time the 1764 boundary survey was completed towards the end of September, Cook and the *Alarm* were in Jamaica.

Fact 4: Finally, in addition to not making the error, James Cook *DISCOVERED* the error. This was documented as recently as 1940 by Robert Lee Meriwether, who stated:

...the findings of James Cook, who had been employed in 1767 as one of the surveyors to make a map of the province. Cook showed that the surveyors of the line of 1764 had run it eleven miles south of the thirty-fifth parallel...⁹

A report submitted by a committee of the Council of South Carolina on the topic of a line proposed by Governor Tryon, of North Carolina, included the following comments:

The Committee now beg leave to offer a few Reasons why it will be improper to make the continuation in a due West Course of the Line of 1764 to be the Line of Jurisdiction, by repeated observations of Latitude made by Mr. Cook... it appears that the Line run in 1764 which ends at the Salisbury Road near the Catawba River is eleven miles south of what His Majesty intended, by some mistake in the observation of Latitude taken by the Commissioners in 1764 by which Error this province loses about 660 square miles...¹⁰

Shortly after his arrival in South Carolina, Cook partnered with Tacitus Gaillard on a proposal to make a map of the province, in response to a solicitation from the Commons House of Assembly. It was during these surveys, in 1768, that Cook discovered the error of the 1764 boundary survey. South Carolina's Governor Montagu had initially been receptive to the North Carolina governor's proposal to extend the 1764 boundary due west to the Cherokee boundary. However, his attitude quickly changed when he learned of Cook's discovery. For compensation for the loss of territory resulting from the 1764 boundary survey, Governor Montagu proposed running the boundary up the Catawba River; he sent James Cook to survey that region.

His Excellency (the Governor) informed the Board that he had received a letter from Mr. Cook the Surveyor with a Map of the courses of the Branches of the Catawba River and the adjacent country ...to be laid before the committee to prepare a representation on the Boundary Line between the two provinces...

Wednesday 15th March 1769¹¹

The manuscript map referred to by Governor Montagu, likely completed early in 1769, is in the National Archives at Kew, UK. A moderate resolution image of it is

available on line via the [South Carolina State Archives](#). If that link doesn't work, an 1895 facsimile is viewable by clicking on the thumbnail below.



Facsimile of 1769 survey by James Cook; image courtesy of the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Based on the above evidence and facts, one could easily reach a conclusion that James Cook has been libeled repeatedly during the past two decades. But wait, there's more! Over the past half century, there have been statements to the effect that [Henry Mouzon's](#) 1775 map of the Carolinas corrected errors on the [1773 Cook map](#). One example: "Mouzon corrected both the Catawba and the Upstate river errors of the Cook map."¹² Unfortunately, Mouzon's manuscript map of South Carolina does not survive. Additionally, a strong argument has been made that Mouzon, through no fault of his own, contributed very little, if any, to the published "Mouzon map" of the Carolinas.¹³ Furthermore, the South Carolina portion of the published "Mouzon map" is almost a direct copy of Cook's 1773 map of South Carolina. That makes it impossible to determine what corrections or differences may have been present on Mouzon's manuscript map. In a 1774 advertisement describing his manuscript map, Mouzon mentions corrections to the lower Santee River, but does not mention the Catawba River by name. Since the courses of "the Catawba and the Upstate rivers" are essentially identical on the 1773 Cook and 1775 published "Mouzon" maps, the claim that Mouzon corrected Cook's errors there has no evidentiary basis. That's not to say that Mouzon didn't make corrections, only that there is absolutely no extant evidence thereof.

James Cook's documented history in South Carolina covers a span of approximately ten years. Pre-South Carolina, only his four years in the service of the Royal Navy are known. During his South Carolina years, he was responsible for the

two best colonial era maps of South Carolina and the discovery of the boundary error created by other surveyors in 1764. Whether he remained in South Carolina after the Revolutionary War or went elsewhere is unknown. Some sources state that he returned to England (a Loyalist?). Cook “disappears from the record in 1776.”¹⁴ Regarding his place in South Carolina history, James Cook should be commended for the superb survey work he did. We should put the historical record back on track and put an end to the false narrative that blames him for the 1764 boundary survey error.

Speaking of surveys, if you “survey” the posts on the North Carolina Map Blog, you may find similarly egregious errors. Some have already been brought to our attention and corrected. Please notify us of errors using the “What’s on your mind?” comment box at the bottom of each blog page.

REFERENCES

1. From an essay by Louise Pettus, in the July 1995 issue of *BACKSIGHTS*, published by the Surveyors Historical Society. At the end of the essay as published in *BACKSIGHTS*, is the following statement: “Reprinted from a booklet compiled by the Tri County Professional Land Surveyors Association, ‘With the permission of Winthrop College and the Author Ms. Louise Pettus.’” The author did not cite any sources. The essay, as published in *BACKSIGHTS*, is on line [here](#).
2. Linklater, Andro. 2002. *Measuring America: how an untamed wilderness shaped the United States and fulfilled the promise of democracy*. Waterville, Maine: Thorndike Press, p32. Linklater cites Pettus (Exhibit A) as the source for “the rains, the hot weather and the insects”.
3. From an essay by Robert D. Temple in the Summer 2011 issue of [Carologue](#), a quarterly general-interest magazine published by the South Carolina Historical Society. In his essay, “Troublesome Boundaries: Royal Proclamations, Indian Treaties, Lawsuits, Political Deals, and Other Errors Defining Our Strange State Lines,” Temple did not provide any citations, but it’s a reasonable assumption that he relied on Pettus, either directly or indirectly.
4. Tom Horton, “Grandest home site is atop of Cook’s Mountain”, in the *Moultrie News*, July 17, 2012, accessed on line at

https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/grandest-home-site-is-atop-of-cook-s-mountain/article_75e4327f-b9cb-5def-989e-0959a7518d04.html on 3/7/2018. This newspaper article was subsequently published in book form in 2014 as part of a compilation of this journalist's columns, under the title [*History's Lost Moments, Volume V*](#).

5. A Plan of the temporary boundary-line between the provinces of North and South Carolina, run agreeable to the instruction given us by ... Arthur Dobbs, Esq., Governor of North Carolina and ... William Bull, Esq., Lieut.-Governor of South Carolina, and finished ; as witness our hands this 24th September, 1764. Ja. Moore, George Pawley, Saml. Wyly, Arthur Mackay, Survrs.. Public Record Office (UK), [CO 700 / Carolina 25](#).
6. The/An original is in the National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.
7. See Captain's log, *Alarm*, ADM 51/3757, and master's log, *Alarm*, ADM 52/1127, in the National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.
8. Master James Cook and Gulf Coast Cartography; Robert R. Rea; *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Jan., 1985), pp. 280-302. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30146627> . For additional references on South Carolina's James Cook, see Appendix I in *Captain James Cook in Atlantic Canada: The Adventurer and Map Maker's Formative Years*, by Jerry Lockett, Formac Publishing Company Limited, 2010. See also, "Too many Cooks", Jeanette D. Black with R. A. Skelton in *The Map Collector*, no. 34 (March 1986): pp10-15.
9. Meriwether, Robert Lee, *The Expansion of South Carolina, 1729-1765*. Kingsport, Tenn.: Southern Publishers, Inc., 1940, p250.
10. Salley, A.S. *The Boundary Line Between North Carolina and South Carolina*. Bulletins of the Historical Commission of South Carolina. Commission, 1929, p25, citing "Public Records of S.C.", 32, 137-147.
11. See p599 in Sainsbury Copy of the Council Journal, SC Archives.
12. From the *Moultrie News* column cited above in reference #4.
13. See "Mouzon's ghost writer, or, the true Author/Compiler of the 'Mouzon map' of the Carolinas", published in *The Portolan*, Issue 96, Fall 2016, available through the [Washington Map Society](#). A pdf of that specific article is available from the NC Map Blog by request via the "What's on your mind?" comment box at the bottom of the page.
14. Robson, John. 2004. [The Captain Cook encyclopaedia](#). London: Chatham; p169, under heading "Other Cooks."

