

Carolina Journeys

*Exploring the trails of the
Carolinas—both real and
imagined*

by Tom Fowler

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Introduction to Carolina Journeys

In the mid-1980s while traveling in China, I visited a section of the Great Wall that the Chinese authorities were transforming into a major tourist attraction. The chairlift from the parking lot up the mountain was still under construction, but a dusty trail up the side of the ridge got us to the Wall. The section of the Wall we reached was in remarkable shape for such an ancient structure. The bricks were all in place, the grout smooth and even, and the guard towers swept clean of dust and debris. The Wall had clearly been restored. Even more impressive, however, was how the Wall kept going, snaking up the incredibly steep slopes on either side of the low point of the ridge on which we stood. And beyond the nearest summits, the Wall continued up narrow ridges and cresting the sharp mountains as far as we could see. Quite remarkable. I was drawn to climb farther along the Wall as it headed up the mountain.

The renovated section of the Wall soon ended and I was hiking on an unreconstructed Great Wall. Small trees and bushes covered the top of the Wall with a narrow dirt path winding upward amid piles of brick and stone. The watch towers were crumbling and remains of stone arched doorways stood out against the sky. This was the real ruin of the Wall—what was left of this magnificent construction after hundreds of years (although the Wall has existed for over 2,000 years, it owes its present form to major renovations made about 500 years ago). There was no telling what I was going to see before I saw it or sometimes what it was even after I saw it. The climbing was steep, but I kept on. Finally at a parapet on the Wall I turned to look back. The view was spectacular. The reconstructed part of the Wall was far below and I could see even more of the Wall coiling around the mountains off into the distance. A faint shout carried up to me. Most of my tour group was still down on the lowest part of the Wall. Some were waving. Without making out their words, I understood. My hike was over. Regretfully I began my descent.

Now the restored Great Wall was impressive and I would not have missed it for the world. But the unreconstructed Wall was riveting. Time had slowed to a crawl as I trudged up the old Wall

looking at everything so closely. Was it because I didn't know what I was supposed to see? Did my lack of expectation and of preconception, by making everything potentially significant, focus my mind entirely on the present? The rebuilt Wall had been sanitized, standardized, evaluated and interpreted by authorities and experts. It required little of me except to view it and then to compare it to what I'd been told I should see. The old Wall, however, required my attention, my own analysis of what I saw, and my own conclusions. Small wonder that those who never left the smooth, rebuilt brick walk of the restored Wall, having seen the sight, found their thoughts turning toward the bus ride back to Beijing—and how soon lunch would be.

The novelist Walker Percy thought about this effect of expectation upon perception. He described it as surrendering sovereignty over the experience to the expert—or at least to someone else who will evaluate your experience for you even before you experience it. In *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy considered a man from Boston who decides to vacation at the Grand Canyon. He visits his travel agent, looks at all the pamphlets and signs up for a tour of the Canyon. Percy believed this man would find it impossible upon arriving at the Bright Angel Lodge, to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon and see it for what it is. Impossible because, for this man, the Canyon would have been

appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on. The thing is no longer the thing as ... confronted ...; it is rather that which has already been formulated—by picture postcards, geographic book, tourist folders, and the words Grand Canyon. ... The highest point, the term of the sightseer's satisfaction, is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex.

Percy's thesis may help explain why for some of us there is something dissatisfying about visiting the well-known tourist destinations in the Carolinas. These sites may be too well interpreted and packaged for us by those who know better than us. All we need do, indeed all we are implicitly allowed to do, is to follow the excellent

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directions to the site, view the site by following the walking tour, and compare what we've seen to what we were expecting to see. There is nothing to be discovered, nothing to be explored, nothing to be figured out. It's all been done for us.

Luckily, however, the Carolinas are also full of poorly-known tourist destinations that have not been well interpreted or well packaged for us by those who know better. These sites may be hard to find and information about the sites may be hard to come by—sometimes requiring additional effort and often causing additional aggravation. But the trade-off is that visitors to these sites may regain sovereignty over their experience. They may regain that sense of exploration and discovery that can expand and enrich perception, and they may regain the excitement of searching for something you aren't sure you will find.

There are plenty of publications that provide information about the well-known tourist destinations in the Carolinas. Read them at your peril. They will co-opt your sovereignty and reduce you to a sightseer. *Carolina Journeys*, on the other hand, is intended to tell stories of poorly-known sites of interest in the Carolinas. We realize that providing information about these sites is the first step in co-opting your sovereignty and reducing you to a sightseer—so our goal is to avoid providing too much information or too good directions or being too knowledgeable and authoritative. Much will be left up to you, dear reader and Carolina sojourner. It is, of course, for your own good—not because we are lazy. This is, after all, the whole point of this introduction. *Carolina Journeys* will speak of history, culture and specific places—but we also hope our stories will help inspire our readers to perform their own weekend explorations to discover or rediscover the different trails, real and imagined, that can be found throughout the Carolinas. And we hope you will share with us a little (but not too much) about your travels.

Walker Percy observed: “Every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is. But to no one else is it ever as beautiful—except the rare man who manages to recover it, who knows that it has to be recovered.”

Tom Fowler

Little in the Carolinas remains to be discovered, but much continues to be quite beautiful—if we can regain the ability to see it for what it is. *Carolina Journeys* is in the recovery business.

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The unreconstructed Great Wall of China