

The most important figure to grace Bear Island is undoubtedly William Sharpe, who was born during 1883 in Philadelphia. He grew up with a father who was a Calvinist minister, and as a result with little money in the household. He and his brother Norman Sharpe were both interested in neurosurgery from an early age. William went to Harvard to pursue his interest in neurosurgery and also rowing, through which he paid for his tuition. He then later entered Harvard Medical School where he refined his skills as a neurosurgeon. After his schooling he moved to Baltimore, Maryland. William then did his internship at Johns Hopkins Hospital under the prestigious Doctor Cushing. The two doctors bumped heads on many different topics and it didn't help that Doctor Cushing was extremely hot headed. Sharpe eventually left Johns Hopkins Hospital and went with the "Harvard Unit" to China to learn more about new advances in neurosurgery. After that experience he was so intrigued with what he learned that he returned to New York and decided to become a practitioner.

Bear Island was originally a refuge where Hurst would come with friends to relieve the stresses of working as a neurosurgeon. Sharpe was first introduced to the island during 1914, when he came to the island with a group of colleagues. A black guide named John Hurst was assigned to Sharpe's boat. Sharpe became extremely impressed with the extent of knowledge that Hurst had about the outdoors. When Sharpe was guided by Hurst, one of the first things that he came to admire was that John Hurst never accepted tips. He always told Sharpe that he'd already been paid to do the job. He also refused to eat any of the animals that Sharpe shot on their hunting trips. Sharpe noted that he ate only seafood, eggs, and vegetables. This first meeting was the start of a friendship that would last longer than 40 years. Sharpe later asked Hurst to find him an area that was a "retreat which would be beautiful isolated, and have an abundance of fish and game." Hurst finally found an area three years later called the Hammocks. Sharpe bought the land and put Hurst in charge of managing and operating the land from when he bought it. John Hurst eventually married Gertrude Pearson, who was a teacher at a local school. Dr. Sharpe employed her as a cook and housekeeper for his house in the Hammocks.

During the 1920's, Prohibition was in effect, and smugglers used the same inlets and water hideaways that Blackbeard had used hundreds of years earlier, although this time to ferry alcohol. Sharpe complained to the authorities, but they did nothing about it. However, two "shady" characters came to his office in New York and tried to buy the island from him. Sharpe declined to sell, but mentioned that it would be nice if the smugglers left him a little something each time they used the island. By the time Prohibition ended, Sharpe had acquired quite an ample supply of scotch and whisky.

In 1950, while Dr. William Sharpe was writing his will, he decided that he was going to leave the entire estate to John and Gertrude Hurst. But realizing that they could not keep up with all the work that needed to be done, Gertrude suggested that it be turned over to the North Carolina Black Teachers Association. It was intended to be used for recreation and educational purposes. Gertrude Hurst said "Dr. Sharpe offered the estate to me and my husband, and we'd have been glad to take it, but then he made another suggestion, because we wouldn't have been able to do anything with it. He put the question before me, 'how about turning it over to the teachers?' knowing that the organization would stick together, I guess. So, it just went like that."

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