

# State Nickname: The Tar Heel State

## Series: North Carolina Symbols



Think the Tar Heels are just a college basketball team from North Carolina? Think again. The term *Tar Heel* goes a long way back in history. But who came up with it? Several possible origins of the expression have appeared over the years.

The name may have been born in the colonial era. When North Carolina was a British colony, its many longleaf pine trees provided tar and pitch to the English navy. Both naval and merchant ships needed these products to seal their wooden hulls and to protect ropes. For a number of years before the American Revolution, North Carolina exported over 100,000 barrels of tar and pitch annually—more than any other colony.

Making tar and pitch was messy. Workers stacked the pine logs, covered them with earth, and burned them. Tar ran out through channels dug in the lower side of the log pile. The tar that spilled onto the ground stuck to the workers' feet. Tar production employed many North Carolinians and grew into a major industry. As

a result North Carolina came to be known as the Tar Heel State.

Another Tar Heel tale is set during the Revolutionary War. After Lord Cornwallis's troops forded the Tar River in eastern North Carolina on their way to Yorktown in May 1781, they had tar on their feet. The men looked at their gooey soles and said that anyone who waded through North Carolina streams would wind up with tar heels. Patriots had dumped tar into the river to prevent the British army from capturing the waterway. This story dates only to the twentieth century and may have been made up to explain the name of the river.

The most widely accepted version of the origin of Tar Heel comes from the Civil War period. During one of the fiercest clashes of the war, a unit of North Carolinians fought alone after its supporting column had been driven from the battlefield. A group of Virginia soldiers who had retreated asked in a condescending tone, "Any more tar down in the Old North State, boys?" The victorious troops responded quickly, "No, not a bit; old Jeff's bought it all up." "Is that so? What is he going to do with it?" the Virginians asked. "He is going to put it on you'ns heels to make you stick better in the next fight," came the reply. General Robert E. Lee, upon hearing of the incident said, "God bless the Tar Heel boys." Whatever the origin of their nickname, Tar Heels across the state are proud of it. And so is the basketball team!