To Illuminate the Dark Space

Oral Histories of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse
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by Jenny Edwards
edited by Beth P. Storie
Dedicated to the memory of those who kept the light, with gratitude to Lloyd Childers, Outer Banks Conservationists, Beth Storie, Susan Anderson, my mom and everyone who opened their homes and hearts, freely sharing their stories to make this publication possible.

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A Personal Note to the Reader

I moved very quickly to complete this work in time for the 1999 Currituck Beach Light Keepers Descendants Reunion. I had about 12 weeks to conduct research, collect oral histories and write the narrative. During that time, I drove about 2,000 miles to get 25 interviews, listened to nearly 75 hours of tape, made in excess of 200 phone calls and spent approximately 320 hours writing. Given the amount of work and pressing time crunch, mistakes, slights and omissions are unavoidable. I sincerely apologize for them. If not for the sharp eye of Beth Storie, editor, and the excellent research completed by Sandy Clunies and Kinta Delamain, there would be more errors. Ultimately, it is my hope that you see this small book as a beginning, little more than a work in progress.

It is the long-term goal of Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc. to update this publication with more details about the life of the keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Use this book as a jumping-off place to fire your enthusiasm to dig out all the information you have on your ancestors. Now that we have part of the basic story of some of the keepers in print, it should be easier to use this book as a baseline, looking for mistakes that have been made, adding information and insights that augment what we have here, providing new pictures to complement the visual education we’ve gained in this publication.

Everyone involved in putting this book together thanks all of you who sent us information and pictures, who sat down with me to speak the history they remember and who cared about preserving the memory of the keepers and their families.

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— Jenny Edwards
Set it for a moment on the seaside of your mind. Stretch your imagination across the sand, over the breakers, bearing it outward 15 miles to a schooner beyond the horizon. It is not stormy, yet the sea rocks and rolls, pitching your ship back and forth. It a summer night in 1876, and you are a mariner being born along the ocean's unstable and fluid rail. The big blue is all around, a powerful force easily capable of rendering you asunder. The wind is constant, buffeting the sails, rippling the flags. The ocean's breath is humid, bearing down hot upon your skin. Heavy with salt, the dark air is palpable. You can almost reach out and touch it. The only sounds you hear are the wind in the sails, the flags snapping, the ship creaking and the shouts of the other sailors on board, many of whom you have a tenuous relationship with because the pecking order on a ship is harsh. You cannot read or write, but you know the stars. You know you're somewhere off the treacherous shores of the northern Outer Banks. You have heard stories of shipwrecks circulating in the taverns, and these are dangerous waters. You look over the side and see the lace-covered waves heave the ship forward and you wonder if those cold, steel-gray rolling waves will reach up and embrace you. Will they pull you down to some watery gate of the hereafter? You do not fear death as much as you fear the fear, for you have seen the frightful lashings of the drowning. You imagine your body washing ashore, gray and bloated and nibbled upon. Far from home, your corpse would be handled by some unknown surf man whose job that day would be to bury you on the beach, an anonymous grave in shifting sands. There would simply be no way to transport your body home. You know it's not good to dwell on these thoughts, but tonight the sea seems sinister, and you cannot stop your dark musing. Sud-
denly, your thoughts are interrupted by a blink of light, a beam piercing the night, reaching across the water. You cannot see him, and you probably do not know him, but he is there all the same, the light keeper tending the distinctive flash — five seconds on and 90 seconds off — of the last lighthouse on the northern Outer Banks. His light is warning your captain not here . . . stay off this shore; there is danger here. Even more, it is saying it’s okay, you are not lost. You are less than 19 miles from me and the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

It is only in the seascape of imagination that one can appreciate what lighthouses meant to the blood and bones of mariners in the days before electronic navigation. Lighthouses were vital to business as well. Before interstate highways and airports, when American commerce was oriented toward the sea, wealthy merchants, insurance companies and ship captains — all those who bore the financial cost of lost freight — needed reliable lights to guide ships and deliver cargo safely into port. Lighthouses sprouted like mushrooms on American waterways in concert with the Industrial Revolution and the budding consumer culture. Yet, the value of lighthouses must be measured in more than business or even in lives saved. The lighthouse compound was the place where light keepers and their families lived, a place where the human drama played out in all its passions, laughter and sorrow. Keepers and their wives built marriages, gave birth to children and nurtured families at their lighthouse posts. For many light keepers, their entire lives were defined by the light, a remarkable fact when you consider the nature of work in the Industrial Age.

The first machines of the Industrial Revolution were things like the Spinning Jenny and the flying shuttle, technology that quickly wove the textile industry into the factory system. Mass production methods outperformed traditional cottage industries, and factories produced better and cheaper coats, shoes, hats and other apparel. Tailors, hatters, coppers and other craftsmen were literally forced one by one out of their home-based businesses. For the first time in history, people had to leave home to go to work in factories. Soon industrialization changed the character of labor across the board. Work became impersonal. Bosses no longer knew who their employees were; there were just too many of them. Work days were regulated by the factory clock, focusing on production with no sense of a final product or even sense of purpose. Last names such as Baker, Merchant, Cooper, Smith and Taylor became just names, no longer connected with a family business. Labor lost its meaning, and people began to feel estranged from their work. There were, of course, exceptions to the trend. One sector of employment that eluded automation for nearly a century was the United States Lighthouse Board, later called the United States Bureau of Lighthouses, and the men and a few women who bore the poetic title of light keeper.

For more than a century, until automation finally caught up with them, light keepers remained among the few workers in the industrialized world who did not suffer from the modern malaise of alienation from their labor. They knew their work saved lives and often lived within yards of the lighthouse itself. Work and home were one and the same. For this reason alone, oral historians should strive to collect and interpret the histories of keepers and their families. But, the histories of light keepers are important for another reason as well. Light keepers and their families were among the few people who lived and worked on the Outer Banks before tourism changed the face of the barrier islands. Their memories tell us much about what it was like to live near the
water before the construction boom of the past few decades. Lighthouses and the stories of their keepers also serve as reminders that natural events such as storms and the littoral shift of the islands make barrier islands a harsh environment for fixed buildings.

The Currituck Beach Lighthouse, located near the village of Corolla on N.C. Highway 12, is the most northern lighthouse on North Carolina's famous string of barrier islands known as the Outer Banks. There is no place on earth quite like the Outer Banks. At the widest point, the islands sweep out 20 miles into the Atlantic, farther than any barrier islands anywhere in the world. Narrow shifting ribbons of sand, the islands are banked on the west by sounds and on the east by the Atlantic Ocean. At irregular intervals, inlets of varying depths and widths punch through islands, enabling marine life and boats to move between the ocean and sounds. Off the shore from the barrier islands, large sand bars migrate here and there beneath the ocean's surface. Indeed, the barrier islands themselves are actually very large sand bars loosely held in place by vegetation.

Today the barrier islands are viewed as a place of leisure, an escape from the pressures of work, a playground of the senses. Each year, the Outer Banks is a vacation destination for hundreds of thousands of visitors. Parents who went to the shore when they were kids bring their children to play in surf; sport fishermen cast hopeful lines praying for trout, settling for spot; and lovers rendezvous on the shore warmed by sand and salted by sea spray. On a good day at the beach, it is hard to imagine that the sea side was not, or is not, always such a great place to be. Coastal winters are characterized by northeastern storms and the autumn months punctuated by unpredictable hurricanes. Both types of storms batter the coast with high winds and waves. When they occur during high tide, the ocean can engulf an entire barrier island. The tidal surge of a hurricane is powerful enough to sweep entire buildings, livestock, house pets and people out to sea. Before the advent of electronic navigation and weather satellites, a storm's wind and waves had the capacity to pummel ships to pieces upon the shoals. Even when the sea was calm, sailors could easily lose their bearings at night and mistakenly ram into shoals. Indeed, so many sea vessels wrecked off the Outer Banks that the region earned the morbid epithet "Graveyard of the Atlantic." Beginning
in the Colonial period, lighthouses were
constructed along the barrier islands to help
mariners avoid the dangerous shoals. But, until
the last half of the 18th century, the northern
Outer Banks remained a dark and dangerous
stretch to navigate. Finally in 1872, Congress
appropriated $50,000 "to illuminate the dark
space . . . between Bodie's [sic] Island and Cape
Henry." The lighthouse was in operation by late
1875, and it came to be known as the Currituck
Beach Lighthouse.

With a few notable exceptions, keepers
and their families have left no written records of
their lives. Sure, the federal archives have the
logs and notes written up for the Lighthouse
Board and later for the U.S. Bureau of Light-
houses. But those tell us little about what the
people were like who lived and worked at
lighthouses. The last generation of light keepers
has almost passed us by. Their children and
grandchildren, however, remain a voice from
the past, and their memories are our last,
tenuous link to a bygone era. In the summer of
1999, the Outer Banks Conservationists
launched the Currituck Beach Oral History
Project in an attempt to preserve and interpret
some of the memories of the descendants of the
light keepers who lived and worked at
Currituck Beach.

A generation of historians who came of
age in the 1960s institutionalized the field of
oral history, touting it as a way to recover so-
called lost history. Since then, other historians
have attacked oral history as deficient, some-
thing less than traditional history, which is
drawn from surviving written documents of the
period. The traditional historians pointed to
studies in memory that suggested human
beings do not remember things as they actually
happened. Rather, we construct memory to fit
current needs, clipping this incident, molding
that moment in order to organize and explain
our past in a way that suits us. Therefore, the
traditionalists argue, oral history, by definition
rooted in memory, is inherently faulty. Oral
historians have countered this argument by
pointing out that every human endeavor is
ultimately constructed. Who says that the
literary elite should have the sole privilege —
and responsibility — of being the voice from the
past? Autobiographies are written for specific
purposes, letters have agendas, census takers
get sloppy, even newspaper accounts are
prejudiced. So, can we ever recover the past as
it really happened? Perhaps, in the end that is
not the most interesting question, or even the
most important, because ultimately history is
not written for those who have passed on. It is
written for us, and for our children. It contains
lessons from the past, explains our present and
gives us hope for the future.

Almost all the oral histories for this
publication were taken during June and July of
1999 in the living rooms and kitchens of the
descendants who still live near the coast, from
Wanchese, North Carolina, to Norfolk, Virginia.
Distance and time constraints made long-
distance travel prohibitive, so some informal
interviews and conversations were done over
the telephone. If an interview or conversation
was taped, it is indicated in the footnotes that
follow each chapter. All the tapes will be
transcribed and deposited in the archives of the
Outer Banks History Center in Manteo, North
Carolina. They are available to researchers,
scholars and anyone else who is interested in
listening to them.
In the spring of 1873, the U.S. government paid $225 for 36 acres of barrier island stretching from sound to sea adjacent to the tiny village of Corolla, North Carolina. It was the future site of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse compound. The area was not widely known owing to its remote location; however, the people who knew the region called it Whaleshead after a large sand dune resembling the head of a whale. In June of 1875, a construction crew drove 24-foot pilings in the ground, firm footing in sandy soil for the lighthouse. By midsummer, almost a million bricks were mortared and stacked, and the tower was nearly completed. Exactly 214 steps spiraled upward along walls that were five feet eight inches thick at the base and steadily narrowed to three foot thickness at the parapet. On December 1, 1875, the lighthouse broadcast its first beams across Currituck Sound and Atlantic ocean. With rare exceptions, it has been in continuous operation since that day.

The Currituck Beach Lighthouse was the last large lighthouse tower constructed on the Outer Banks. Since lighthouses served as day markers as well as nighttime guides, they had to have a unique appearance and a distinctive flash to allow mariners to distinguish them from each other. Initially, the Currituck Beach flash was five seconds on, 90 seconds off. Later, the timing was changed to three seconds on and 17 seconds off, which is the sequence used today. The Currituck Beach Lighthouse itself is visually
distinctive because it is the only unpainted lighthouse in North Carolina. Since the diamond, candy cane and horizontal patterns had already been adopted by Cape Lookout, Cape Hatteras and Bodie Island lighthouses, a decision was made to leave the Currituck Beach Lighthouse unpainted. When the sun sets over Currituck Sound, the unpainted red bricks glow with a light that appears to emanate from within, softening the imposing tower. While the Currituck Beach Lighthouse was originally constructed by the federal government to assist ships, currently it is preserved and maintained by the nonprofit Outer Banks Conservancy to teach us something about our maritime history.

Today, in coastal resort towns from Maine to Florida, the lighthouse image has been used commercially, associating it more with luxury accommodations, tennis courts, pools and beach recreation and less with a unique place where people lived and worked, a historical link to our shared past. Many aspects of coastal history, not just lighthouses, are caricatured and offered up for sale in the form of snow domes, mugs, dolls, place mats, flags — the list goes on and on. These caricatures tend to trivialize historical events, such as piracy and shipwrecks. For lighthouses, this becomes a problem when it muddles the lighthouse's identity, layering it with commercial meaning, ultimately disconnecting the past from the present. In defense of tourists industries, the negative impact of appropriating historical images is unintended, and certainly does not prevent travelers from combining leisure with education, as evidenced by the unprecedented rise in museum, art gallery and historical site visitation over the past few decades. The introduction of educational yet controversial programs in those institutions has shown that tourists want to be challenged and intellectually stimulated.1

On the Outer Banks, vacationers have a plethora of opportunities to enjoy the beaches and learn something of the region's history as well. Some of the area's most popular historic sites are lighthouse compounds. Because they are among the Outer Banks' oldest surviving architecture, lighthouses have the potential to inform the present about the past. The Currituck Beach Lighthouse on N.C. Highway 12 sits on the original 36-acre site purchased by the government in 1873. In addition to the lighthouse, the grounds contain the 1875 double keepers' quarters, the 1920 small keeper's house, and the original cisterns, brick walkways, privy and storehouse. Visitors are permitted to ascend the same steps climbed by the light keepers written about in this book and are invited to stroll the lighthouse compound that was home to the lighthouse families. Stepping on the grounds of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse is a little like stepping back in time. Strategically planted trees form a protective visual mantle, blocking out the world of parking lots, automobiles and paved roads. Wandering among the original buildings has the effect of collapsing time, allowing the visitor to reflect upon what life was like for the keepers and their families. It is hoped that the following pages open a small window to the past, complementing the tangible, physical environment of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse with the power of historical narrative to fire the imagination.

Horatio Heath
Mary Mizelle Heath
Served 1877-1885

Leona Smith and Mary Heath Powell are sisters and the two surviving grandchildren of Horatio and Mary Heath. Leona was born on May 28, 1905, and is a former school teacher. She currently lives with her son, Charles Smith, and daughter-in-law, Ruth Smith, near the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Charles Smith, a great grandson of Horatio and Mary, is a computer systems consultant. Like her sister, Mary Powell is a retired school teacher. She was born on May 24, 1914, and currently resides with her husband, Larry, in Greensboro, North Carolina. Beverly Wright, a great granddaughter of Horatio and Mary, was born in April 18, 1933, and is also a retired school teacher. She currently resides with her husband, Andy, in Sarasota, Florida.

Horatio’s tale is the oldest known surviving account of any keeper at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. His story dates from the Civil War and related events that took place so far back in time that it is remarkable to find any oral histories on him at all. The Federal records dryly report that on April 26, 1877, Horatio officially replaced Lewis A. Simmons as first assistant to the Currituck Beach Light-Station. The official register also reveals that Simmons had been working at the lighthouse since November of 1875 and was therefore the first first assistant there. Sadly, the stories of those first keepers have been lost with the passage of time. Horatio’s saga, however, has been passed down from generation to generation and endures in the memory of his living descendants.

Horatio was born in the late 1830s somewhere in Pasquotank County, North Carolina. His lifelong love of the sea began there, on the Pasquotank River and at the Albemarle Sound. As a young adult, he worked those waters on fishing boats. Like all watermen of the Outer Banks, Horatio’s very survival depended upon how well he could read the rivers, sounds and ocean tides. It was this skill that would seal his fate both during and after the Civil War, a conflict that forever changed his country and set the course for the rest of his life.

In 1861, the United States Navy’s top priorities were the sea blockade of Confederate supply lines and securing safe shipping harbors for Union vessels. Early in the war, Winfield Scott, head of the United States Army, came up with the Anaconda Plan, named after a
South American snake that squeezes its prey to death. He wanted to choke the Southern states by cutting them off from the outside world, splitting the Confederacy in two and moving troops in from the periphery. In conjunction with the Army’s plan, the Navy’s initial objective was to prevent merchant ships from reaching Southern ports. But, with 3,500 miles of coast line to monitor, it quickly became evident that the United States Navy would need additional ports in the South to provide support services to its ships. The Navy’s first victory in the war was on the Outer Banks at Hatteras Inlet, very close to where Horatio lived.\footnote{Hatteras was an important victory because it was the only inlet for 200 miles deep enough for large ships, and it served as a gateway to the Atlantic for Richmond. Early in the war, rebels had grounded all the navigation buoys in the sounds and dismantled the lighthouse at Hatteras, rendering the Cape one of the most dangerous places for ships along the Outer Banks. Relatively speaking, there was little military presence on the northeast coast of North Carolina. The inlet as well as the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds became a sort of free-for-all land, the haunt of blockade runners and privateers. All that changed, however, on August 28, 1861, when the Union Navy attacked the two forts at Hatteras. Half-built and ill-prepared for battle, the forts surrendered after two days of naval shelling. By February 1862, the entire Pamlico and Albemarle sound regions were under the firm control of the Union, a crushing and demoralizing turn of events for the South.\footnote{ service came at a personal cost above and beyond his lost youth. He had aided the Northern aggressors, however reluctantly, and that meant he was forever suspected of volunteering to undermine the Southern cause, a.k.a. the Lost Cause. After the Civil War, the Lost Cause became a defining characteristic of Southern culture. In her autobiography, Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin remembered that in the late 1800s “…when men like my father [who was a Civil War veteran] spoke of the Lost Cause … they would say, ‘We were never conquered …’ and of reconstruction, ‘I’m an un-reconstructed rebel.’” Across the South in towns and cities, Confederate veterans were honored in celebrations such as parades, military reunions and monument dedications. Lumpkin wrote of a “solemn ceremony, a ‘rebel yell’ from assembled veterans, a band playing Dixie, and oratory of a bygone day.” In this social atmosphere, it did not seem to matter that Horatio was coerced into the Union Navy; the ignominy hung with
him all the same. In the years following the war, as Union troops gradually withdrew, and the so-called political redemption of the South began, Horatio found himself with slimmer and slimmer job prospects. He attempted to get recognition of service and an official discharge from service but was informed that “the Navy Department does not discharge Pilots.” Finally, years later, Horatio’s military service was rewarded when, on April 28, 1876, the superintendent of lights offered Horatio a position as second assistant light keeper at Bodie Island, which he promptly accepted.

By 1877, Horatio was married to Mary Mizelle Heath and had requested a transfer from Bodie Island, probably because he found life with the other keepers, for whatever reason, intolerable. He was moved to the Currituck Beach Light Station where he became first assistant. Upon arriving at Currituck, Horatio and his wife moved into one side of the large keepers’ house. Horatio joined a team of keepers who had been at the light since it first began operations. But, tensions soon ran high between the Heathys and the original keepers at Currituck. In the summer of 1878, the principal keeper N.H. Burrus, told the Lighthouse Service Inspector that Horatio had poisoned the second assistant’s dog. Whether or not Horatio killed the dog, or if he had good cause to put the animal down, has never been determined. But, since the inspector had the authority to nominate keepers for promotions, it damaged Horatio’s career to have such a egregious complaint lodged against him. Horatio requested to be transferred from the Currituck Light. In a long letter, Charles Manning, the Superintendent of Lights, counseled Horatio to:

... strive to do your duty in your position faithfully and have as little to do with them [the other keepers] as possible outside of your regular business in the discharge of your duties.

... and thereby give no cause for complaint as much as you possibly can. I, and all others who know you, have always known you to be peaceable and quiet in your disposition, and I would endeavor to bear up patiently under all the wrongs that may be done with the view of bringing you into disfavor with the Lighthouse Inspector.

Horatio and Mary took Manning’s advice to heart and found the strength of character to stick it out. They were still at the Currituck compound when Burrus was removed from service two days before Christmas in 1879. Lewis A. Simmons, whose shoes Horatio filled just two and a half years earlier, returned to Currituck Beach to become the principal keeper (unfortunately, at the time of this publication, no other information was available on the years
Lewis A. Simmons spent as keeper at Currituck. Both Horatio and Lewis were at Currituck when Thomas Everton, the second assistant, allowed the light to go out on July 22, 1880. Apparently Everton left the light unattended, a serious offense. The Lighthouse Service Inspector investigated the incident in late August and was informed that when Horatio and Lewis reached the top of the tower, they discovered that Everton had failed to pump the oil into the lantern, which had to be done every two to three hours. The offense apparently cost Everton his job because he was removed from duty on September 9, 1880. For more than a month after Thomas Everton left the Currituck compound, Horatio and Lewis worked by themselves during hurricane season. Finally, help arrived when F.W. Bell was appointed second assistant on October 12, 1880. Horatio would see two other principal keepers come and go and would share one side of the house with as many assistants before he and Mary left the lighthouse service for good on June 13, 1885.

Apparently, while he was at Currituck, Horatio had been building a large house in downtown Elizabeth City, right across from the railroad station. Perhaps he and Mary had been planning for some time to leave civil service and go into business for themselves. They opened their new home in Elizabeth City as a boarding house, and Horatio put a small store in one of the downstairs rooms. He decorated the store in nautical themes, a reflection of a seafaring soul who after many trials had finally made his way to higher ground. The boarding house had a cook and perhaps cleaning help as well because Mary's granddaughter, Mary Heath Powell, remembers that her grandmother's job was simply being a good hostess to the boarders. While Mary ran the house, Horatio spent much of his time in the store. The shop had a separate entrance on the street and sold candy and produce. Every Sunday, he would close up the store, walk several miles to the poor house and hold church services for those folks less fortunate than him. He always took candy and other treats from his store to share with the indigent residents.

Both granddaughters remember they were not allowed in grandfather's store while he was working, and they never dared to sneak in when he was not looking because, as Leona flatly stated, "I stood in awe of Grandpa." Beverly Wright, a great granddaughter, summed up Horatio's relationship with his grandchildren like this:

He [Horatio] had such penetrating, piercing eyes and was such a stickler for the truth that [Leona] was very intimidated by him. And one day she and her younger sister, Mary Heath, were given maybe a nickel, some small amount of money, to go over to grandpa's store and make purchases. Because they didn't want to lose it, they put it in their mouths, for safe keeping. When they got into grandpa's store, he came from around the counter and peered down at them and said, 'And what can I do for you little girls?' and they were so scared they swallowed the money.

Although they rarely went into Horatio's store while he was working, if he should step away from the house, his wife, Mary, was brave enough to take the girls into the store and treat them to candy. "She was the one that made us kids comfortable," recalled Mary Powell. "She used to go into the store and get some candy and bring it to us and stuff like that." Horatio could be intimidating to other folks, but he was very affectionate with his wife. Leona remembers that her grandfather "was a fine old man. He thought grandmother [Mary] was the prettiest thing he ever saw. He always called her 'my sweet little lady.' He would go by her chair in the dining room and [pat her
shoulder." Apparently Mary was truly beautiful, as were her daughters, Sally and Lula. Although they were both attractive, Horatio and Mary's daughters were also very different. Sally was a college graduate and, according to Beverly, "had wild ambitious visions of making a million dollars lumbering mahogany in Honduras or mining mica in Western North Carolina." Lula, on the other hand, Beverly remembers, "never had to grow up. She had one of these blessed lives where she could just be a teenager all of her 91 years. [She was] flirtatious, coy, sweet, funny and kid-ish — all of her life." Beverly has incredibly tender memories of her grandmother Lula, and their close relationship has fostered the transmission of the Heath family history from one generation to the next. "I loved her [Lula] dearly because she was more like a teenager, like I was, than a grandmother who was sort of stern or grumpy or unapproachable," Beverly reminisced. "My greatest delight as a kid was to be able to go over and spend a week with Ma-ma [Lula] in Elizabeth City in the summer. We would lie together in her feather bed at night, and she would tell me some of these stories about great grandpa Horatio." Sally, who was Lula’s sister and great aunt to Horatio’s great grandson Charles Smith, also did her part to pass on Horatio’s legacy. One day, when he was a little boy, Charles had done something very good, and as a reward, Sally promised to give him a magnificent ship Horatio carved from a piece of driftwood while he was stationed at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. True to her promise, Charles has that ship encased in glass in his living room today. It is, by his description, one of his prized possessions.

Horatio’s ability to navigate North Carolina’s quirky and dangerous waters started out as a survival skill cultivated in his youth, was later capitalized upon by invading Northern forces and ultimately was relinquished under the shadow of a stigma. But it was not in Horatio’s nature to feel sorry for himself. He persevered until finally securing a coveted position with the lighthouse service. In the end, he had become a self-made businessman and devoted every Sunday afternoon in service to others. In a sense, Horatio’s life was foreshadowed in the words of Henry Adams, a contemporary of the Civil War generation, who wondered:

...whether any of us will ever be able to live contented in times of peace and laziness. Our generation has been stirred up from its lowest layers and there is that in its history which will stamp every member of it until we are all in our graves. We cannot be commonplace....

Indeed, Horatio the person, with his imposing presence, rigorous honesty and intimidating gaze, was anything but commonplace. Yet, his experience in the Civil War is part of a common chapter in American history, a common thread linking us together. The historian David Lowenthal has likened the past to home. Like home, the past is where we come from, and being cut off from the past is like losing the way home. Alienated from our roots, we become nostalgic, longing for days gone by.
Horatio's story and all the keepers' stories in this small book are important because they have lasted throughout the generations, connected people to their shared past and provided a sense of identity to the living descendants, not unlike a distant lighthouse beacon, patiently signaling the way home.

A boat carved by Horatio Heath from driftwood found on Corolla beaches. The note inside in Mr. Heath's own writing says, "This knife made this boat in the year 1880, built by H. W. Heath and rigged."

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. Chart of Bureau, Navy Department, Washington, D.C., to Horatio W. Heath, Plymouth, North Carolina, 8 October 1867, original in the hands of Beverly Wright, Sarasota, Florida.
12. F.J. Higginson, Lighthouse Service Inspector, Office of the Lighthouse Inspector, Baltimore, Maryland, to Horatio Heath, First Assistant Keeper, Curruck Beach Lighthouse, North Carolina, 27 August 1880, original in the hands of Beverley Wright, Sarasota, Florida; Horatio Heath, First Assistant Keeper, Curruck Beach Lighthouse, North Carolina, to F.J. Higginson, Lighthouse Inspector, Office of the Lighthouse Inspector, Baltimore, Maryland, 2 September 1880, original in the hands of Beverley Wright, Sarasota, Florida; data compiled from the National Archives, Washington, D.C., by Curruck Beach Lighthouse staff under the supervision of Lloyd Childers, Executive Director and Light Keeper, 1999.
13. Data were compiled from the National Archives, Washington, D.C., by Curruck Beach Lighthouse staff under the supervision of Lloyd Childers, Executive Director and Light Keeper.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
William Riley Austin
Lovie Peele Austin
Served 1891-1929

Oswald S. (O.S.) Austin is one of the surviving grandchildren of William Riley and Lovie Peele Austin. He was born in Riley and Lovie's house in Corolla, North Carolina, on November 7, 1916. He was wounded in the Pacific while serving in the U.S. Navy Special Forces during World War II. After the war, he served in the U.S. Coast Guard until he retired. His wife, Grace Austin, was born in Brownsville, Texas, on October 11, 1920. She retired as the head of the Currituck County Library. Norris Austin is the youngest grandchild of Riley and Lovie. He is a lifetime resident of Corolla and retired after a full career as the Corolla Postmaster.

William Riley Austin was born near the Atlantic Ocean in Trent (now Frisco), North Carolina, on April 7, 1859, and in his youth he made a living as a sailor on that ocean. But, like many young men, he was lured away from the sea by the love of a woman. According to the family legend, while Riley courted Lovie Peele, a local girl, she made it clear to him that she had no desire to unite in Holy Matrimony with a sailor. Precisely why she did not want to marry a seaman has been obscured by the passage of time. Yet, it is clear that she was acutely aware of the dangers of ocean voyage along the Outer Banks. Lovie grew up on the North Carolina coast, and she certainly lived her entire life witnessing dangerous storms and deadly shipwrecks that often laid siege along those shores. After a storm had passed, the timbers that washed ashore from wrecked vessels were woven into the foundation of daily life. Many homes, schools, churches and fishing shanties were built, at least in part, with salvaged pieces of ships. So, even when the sea was calm and days were sunny, the built environment remained a daily reminder of the treacherous shore upon which the people of the Outer Banks lived.

It is quite likely that Lovie did not want to risk becoming an early widow, especially since shipwrecks seemed to run in Riley's family. Indeed, a shipwreck was responsible for
landing the first Austin on the Outer Banks. In the late 1700s, one of Riley’s ancestors, Thomas Austin, was beached when his ship was dashed apart near Hatteras Island. He survived the wreck and ended up staying in the area and establishing the Austin family on the Outer Banks. By the time Riley was courting Lovie, he had already survived his own sea disaster. Riley regularly worked two sailing vessels, the *Cynthia* and the *Boston*. Both ships were freighters, transporting lumber from Hatteras to Philadelphia. During one of the voyages, the *Cynthia* foundered in a severe winter storm off False Cape near the North Carolina and Virginia line.³ Though Riley survived, his shipwreck experience has become part of the Austin family lore, a tale of survival and romance. As Grace recently recalled:

The crew made their way to Norfolk, Virginia, then to Elizabeth City, and finally home to Hatteras. Riley asked Lovie to marry him and she refused to marry a sailor. So, he quit the sea and joined the lighthouse service at Hatteras.³

Riley was fortunate to get a government position with the lighthouse service, a secure job that provided him and Lovie with housing, some basic staples such as kerosene, and a modest salary.⁴ Riley’s first appointment was to the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, probably near the very spot where his grandfather swam ashore years earlier. Around 1891, Riley was transferred to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

By the 1920s, Riley and Lovie were living in the north side of the double keepers’ house with their seven children, William, Pell, John, Jennie, Gertrude, Ruth and Fannie — the last fourborn in the keepers’ house.⁵ During part of his tenure, between 1893 and 1913, Riley and his family shared this one side of the double keepers’ house with his brother, Wesley, sister-in-law, Belle, and their eight children, five of whom were born in the keepers’ house. One can imagine how crowded this side of the house must have been with up to 16 children and four adults living in only six rooms. The six rooms in the other side of the house were occupied solely by the head keeper and his family.⁵

O.S. Austin remembers visiting his grandparents, Riley and Lovie, while they were keepers. George Johnson’s son and O.S. used to play together chasing rabbits, playing hide and seek and sneaking up the lighthouse tower while their fathers slept during the day. The grounds were clean, carpeted with perpetually trimmed grass and boasting nice brick walkways, perhaps the only sidewalks in Corolla, and, indeed, at that time, on the whole Outer Banks. O.S remembers trimming the grass between the bricks with a pocket knife. Lovie, Esmeralda and Lucy kept neat garden beds bursting with multicolored flowers. In the summer, it was too hot to spend time outdoors, so the children were allowed to wait until the sun dropped below the horizon to play outside. But, they had to be quiet because Riley was usually resting in the attic, trying to get some sleep before he went on duty at midnight. “My grandfather,” remembered O.S., “would be all
the way in the top [of the house] where he used to sleep, and he'd holler for us to be quiet because he would have to get up at midnight and go on watch." Once on duty, there was no sleep for Riley because he had to make sure the light did not go out in the tower. O.S. remembers Riley made several trips a day to the top of the tower, as did the other keepers on the compound. In fact, Riley climbed the tower so many times every day that when he got off duty his legs would still be stepping high. Like a sailor wobbling with sea legs on solid ground, Riley's gait matched the lighthouse steps even when on flat surface.\(^8\)

Although Riley and Lovie kept the light for the benefit of ocean-going vessels, their life was oriented toward the sound. Like many Outer Banks homes, the large keepers' house in which they lived stood with its back to the ocean, facing the sound.\(^3\) When Riley and Lovie began their duty at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, the seashore had only recently entered the American imagination as a place of leisure.\(^9\) Riley and Lovie probably saw the beach as a dangerous and hostile environment, no doubt for very good reasons. It was from across the ocean that came northeastern squalls and hurricanes, the coast's most devastating storms. The beach strand itself was the site of shipwrecks and the haunts of unsavory characters who lured ships into trouble with false lights. In sharp contrast to the beach, from across Currituck Sound came supplies, mail and visitors. There was a boat landing stretching into the sound in front of the house. Supplies were unloaded from the boat onto a flat-bed cart that ran on a rail over the pier, carrying the cargo to the shore. After everything was unloaded, the cart was rolled into a small storage house built just for it, and the double
doors were closed and locked up. The storage
shed really served two purposes: first to keep
the cart out of the weather and second to keep it
away from children. There were not many
amusements for the children of lighthouse
keepers, and the cart, which could be pushed
with relative speed along the pier, would have
been too tempting for youngsters to resist.11

Because it was usually calm, the sound
water was more recreationally appealing than
the ocean, and it hosted a plethora of wild
game. Well-heeled sportsmen came every year
to Currituck Sound to hunt waterfowl, paying
local men to act as guides. Corolla boys earned
extra money on the sound by trapping muskrats
and selling them to distributors who shipped
them north. O.S. recalled that he was paid
around two to three dollars apiece for them. “In
the South,” he recalled, “they were muskrats,
but in the North, they were marsh rabbits.” The
meat was consumed by the well-to-do in fancy
restaurants, and the fur was stitched into coats
for elite women.

Austin remembers that, as a child, he did
not have much contact with his grandfather.
Riley was always busy with something: At
night, he was on duty in the lighthouse, and
during the day, he was either sleeping, garden-
ing or fishing, the latter two being pastimes he
really enjoyed. O.S. remembers that many days,
after his grandfather got off work, Riley would
hoist a net on his shoulder and head out for the
sound. Also, like many keepers, he tended a
garden on the compound. After retirement,
Riley moved up the road to the village of Corolla
and devoted much of his time to cultivating the
ground. He would borrow “Mr. Johnson’s old
white horse to plow his garden,” recalled O.S.,
“and he did more work than the horse did.”12 For
many people on the Outer Banks, gardening
and fishing were important food sources,
supplementing market groceries in a cash-poor
economy. Yet, from today’s perspective, the
image of a retired light keeper working his
garden is simply a lovely notion, the stuff of
myths amplified by Riley’s status as a ship-
wrecked sailor who traded a seaman’s life for a
marriage vow.13

2. Norris Austin, taped telephone conversation, 22 June 1999. Norris did caution me that he may have the name of the ship
   wrong.
4. Francis Holland, Jr., America’s Lighthouses: An Illustrated
5. Grace Austin, conversation, 23 June 1999. Also, the names of Riley and Lovie’s children were found at www.ancestry.com
   on 22 June 1999.
6. Data were compiled from the National Archives, Washington,
   D.C., by Currituck Beach Lighthouse staff under the
   supervision of Lloyd Childers, Executive Director and Light
   Keeper. Up until sometime between 1910 and 1920, the only
   housing on the Currituck Beach compound was the double
   keepers’ house. According to a document titled, “Description
   of Buildings, Premises, Equipment, Etc., at Currituck Beach
   Light-Station, Seacoast of North Carolina,” prepared by the
   Department of Commerce and Labor and dated May 1, 1908,
   there were three keepers at the Currituck compound at that
time. The keeper had six rooms, and the two assistants had
three rooms each. A second house, now commonly referred to
as the small keeper’s house, was constructed at the Long
Point station, dismantled, floated by barge over the Currituck
Sound and reassembled on the Currituck compound. Exactly
when that occurred, however, is a matter of debate. As of this
writing, the oral history and secondary written sources do not
agree on the year the small keeper’s house appeared in the
compound. It is assumed that the keepers in the photograph
include Wesley and Riley because they were both living in the
double keepers’ house when the photograph was taken.
8. ibid.
10. For more on American perceptions of the beach see
   Kasson, John, Amusing the Million: Corely Island at the Turn
12. ibid.
13. ibid.
Wesley Austin
Belle Barnett Austin
Served 1893-1913

Walter Potter Garrish is the son of Ruby Austin Garrish who was the seventh of eight children born to light keeper Wesley Austin and his wife, Belle. Potter, as he is known on the Outer Banks, was born in Beaufort, North Carolina, in February 1929. He served in the United States Air Force for 22 years and currently lives in Hampton, New Hampshire.

Wesley Austin worked most of his light keeping years on Ocracoke Island, and much of what is known about his career is from his tenure there. Sadly, there is no one who remembers the time when Wesley and his family lived at the Currituck Beach compound. Even so, we can make some conjecture on what life was like for Wesley, his wife, Belle, and their children at Currituck Beach.

Wesley worked his way up the ladder of the lighthouse business. He began on supply boats, delivering goods to light stations along the Outer Banks. By the end of 1885, Wesley had been promoted to keeper. He became third assistant keeper at the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, made the jump to first assistant in 1892 and finally left Hatteras in November of 1893.† He and Belle had their first three children at Hatteras, Lola, Sarah and Maude. Wesley was then promoted to first assistant at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. It was the fall of 1893 and Wesley, Belle, Lola, Sarah and little Maude made the trip north, probably in a boat with room for very few possessions.‡ By the time Wesley arrived on the Currituck Beach compound, his brother, William Riley Austin, had been working as second assistant there for more than a year. It is not clear why Riley did not get or take the first assistant position, assuming that first assistant was a more desirable post than second assistant. Whatever the reason, Wesley was appointed first assistant over his brother, who
had seniority at Currituck. Perhaps Wesley had more experience than Riley, having been first assistant at Hatteras before transferring to Currituck. We do know that in 1891, Riley had made the lateral move to Currituck as second assistant. What, if any, impact this had on the brothers' relationship is unknown. If Riley harbored any resentments against his brother for leapfrogging into the first assistant position, he must have resolved them because the two lived and worked closely together for nearly two decades.

Wesley Austin was born in 1864 on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, just months before the end of the Civil War, a conflict that rent a nation in two and pitted brother against brother. Wesley and his brother Riley were the children of a generation that saw families divided along ideological and moral fault lines. Unlike many siblings of the previous generation, however, Wesley and his brother grew up to spend many of their adult years working side by side in the common effort to prevent ocean disasters off Currituck Beach. For about 20 years, they shared one side of the double keepers' quarters. Each side of the keepers' quarters had a total of six rooms. The principal keeper and his family had the entire south side of the house to themselves. The assistants, however, had to share the north side. It must have been very crowded with Wesley, Belle and their children living in three rooms on one floor of the house and Riley and his family in three rooms on the other floor. In 1893, a photograph was taken of the large keepers' quarters, and it is quite likely that Wesley and Riley are the two men standing on the north porch of the house.

Belle and Lovie, Riley's wife, probably worked closely together as well doing household chores such as cooking, canning and cleaning. It is likely that the kitchen was located in a building outside the keepers' house and that Belle and Lovie shared the kitchen. They probably also tended a communal garden, kept a milk cow or two and raised hogs and chickens in fences behind the compound. Belle and Lovie gave birth to at least nine babies in the large keepers' house, perhaps more if there were stillbirths, which was not uncommon at the time. Belle birthed five children in the keepers' house — Walter, Leon, Monford, Ruby and Wilma; Ruby delivered four children — Jennie, Gertrude, Ruth and Fannie. The two women must have helped each other through the painful and sometimes frightening process of childbirth, offering a cold rag or holding a hand. Whispersing words of comfort. When one had a sick or injured child, the other probably pitched in, doing extra work to get everybody fed, clothes washed, children to bed and a host of other chores expected of a lighthouse wife. Because it demanded so much attention, the lighthouse compound became the stage upon which family traditions were played out. It's likely that Wesley and Riley celebrated every Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas at the lighthouse. Wesley's older daughters were courted there, probably on the front porch of the keepers' house and in the parlor. When the time came for marriage, they were probably wed in nearby chapels.

Life for Austin families changed in 1912 when Wesley received news he was getting his own lighthouse. He was promoted to principal keeper at Ocracoke Island. By this time, Wesley and Belle's oldest girls were married to local Currituck County boys, and they remained behind with their new families. Sarah married Willie Lewark, who was in the Coast Guard, and they eventually built a home in Kill Devil
Hills, North Carolina. Maude married a Griffin who later became a police officer in Norfolk. Iola married Cleveland Lewark, but she died during childbirth about a decade later. Cleveland eventually remarried and went on to manage the Knight House, a mansion that today is known as the Whalehead Club but in its day was called Corolla Island by its owner.\(^6\)

While the story of Knight House and the people who built it is a bit off the central story of Wesley Austin and his immediate family, it's worth inserting here because of the impact the mansion had on the people who lived near it in that place and time. The club was built and owned by Edward Collins Knight, Jr., who made a great deal of money with the Pennsylvania Railroad and the American Sugar Refinery companies. After Edward's first wife died, he married a hard-drinking sharp shooter, Marie Louise LeBel. Local lore says that when she was denied access to gender-biased hunting clubs on Currituck Sound, she and her husband responded by building an extravagant club near the lighthouse. The Knight House took several years and a small fortune to complete. It was endowed with a basement, elevator, swimming pool, five chimneys (the center one fake), corduroy walls, cork floors, hardwood trim, a grand piano and a copper roof.\(^7\) One could extrapolate that the club was an ostentatious show of wealth intended to snub the smaller, crude hunting clubs that turned away Marie Louise some years earlier. Whether or not Knight House brought Marie Louise the satisfaction of revenge is uncertain. It, however, did provide some employment opportunities to people in the village of Corolla. Before the Knight House, the only way to make a living on Currituck Beach was to be lucky enough to get a government job or by fishing, trapping and hunting. The Knight House needed a full staff, from cleaning help to hunting guides, in order to operate. Edward and Marie Louise were city folks and did not know how to drive in the sand, so they hired Melvin, Cleveland and Iola's oldest son, to chauffeur them around. It must have been an exciting job for a 12-year-old boy. The Knights liked Melvin so much that when they returned home to Rhode Island for the summer months, they convinced him to go with them to work as their butler. By all accounts, Edward Knight was a generous soul, and his presence near the village of Corolla and the lighthouse compound was a welcome one.

After they left Currituck, Wesley and Belle lived the rest of their days on Ocracoke Island and became valued and respected members of that community. Belle was an accomplished seamstress and sewed garments for her family and other people on Ocracoke. Wesley kept the light burning in the Ocracoke
Going to the left in the back row, Miss Iola Austin (school teacher with hat), Della Sanderlin, Minnie Walker, Addie Lewark, Sarah Austin, Jenny Austin, Cora Baum, Maud Austin. Next row: Workland Parker, Earl Walker, Bill Haymon and Chaunce Haymon ?, Monford Austin, John Baum, Cantwell Sanderlin, Beatrice Parker, Nell Swan, Ruth Austin, Leon Austin, Lila Haymon. Two on left end, Brady Parker and Bryan Sanderlin. Front row: Franny Austin, two Looks (?) children, Roxanna Baum, ? Haymon, Dora Haymon, Nell Walker, Lil Sanderlin and Roxanna Baum.

Lighthouse that many local mariners relied upon. The living memories that endure of Wesley Austin are through the eyes of a child growing up on Ocracoke. Although sketchy, the memories present a picture of an honorable man of faith. The following is patched together from a conversation with grandson Walter Potter Garrish about his grandfather:

Just up the road [on Ocracoke Island], my father ran a grocery store. I only remember him [Wesley Austin] in relation to my father's store. He was always out there. He was retired then, and he always came out everyday and chatted. It [the store] was a gathering place for all the people to sit around and chat. It was always fun listening to the old stories. Wesley was always coming up, sitting on the porch. It was sort of a gathering place for some of the older men. Even with the pictures I would look at of Wesley, he would look old even when he was young. He had that mustache. He was just a grandfatherly type of guy. He loved his Dr. Pepper. I can remember [laughter] that is always what he drank when he came to the store. He liked his cold bottle of Dr. Pepper. [Wesley was a] very, very family oriented man. He passed on a lot of his faith and his feelings onto his children.
The Knight House

That was reflected in them. I know it was in my mother [Ruby]. [Wesley] was a man you could look up to and admire. My mother always said that. She loved him for that and for those things that he passed on to the children. I don’t think you could find anyone that did not admire him for that.\(^8\)

Wesley, who had suffered from palsy all his life, retired after he had gotten, in his words “too old and shaky to serve my country as light keeper.” But, he went on to say that “I will continue to serve my God. I will never be too old to serve Him, and by serving God, I serve my country best. God and my country will be first with me until the end.”\(^7\) Although Wesley and Belle made Ocracoke their final home, Currituck Beach held many memories for them. Along with uncles, aunts and cousins, that’s where the family had worked, played, worshiped, celebrated, argued, wept and laughed together. One can imagine that when Wesley and Belle loaded up the boat that November day in 1912 and departed for Ocracoke, part of their family remained on the dock, waving good-bye until the boat was out of sight. The family left behind would remain a tie to Currituck Beach. For nearly two decades, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse had been a center of gravity, an axis around which family life rotated, finally spinning off into new generations of Austins on Ocracoke Island and near the Currituck Sound.

2. Walter Potter Garrison, taped telephone conversation, 27 July 1999; Cheryl Shelton-Roberts, “Wesley Austin, Keeper of Ocracoke,” Lighthouse News 3 (Spring 1997), 2-6; also taken from data compiled from the National Archives, Washington, D.C., by Currituck Beach Lighthouse staff under the supervision of Lloyd Childers, Executive Director and Light Keeper.
3. The hierarchy of keepers on lighthouse compounds is an issue that needs further study. Currently, some of the Currituck Beach light keepers’ living descendants are questioning whether and to what degree the assistant keepers were ranked. For example, was the first assistant considered to be a more elite position than that of second assistant? According to the records of the Treasury Department, during the years 1895, 1897, 1903 and 1905, Wesley was first assistant and was paid a total of $500 while Riley as second assistant made $450. Of course, the pay rate may have been based on years of service instead of level or expertise or job responsibilities. In the Horatio Heath’s papers there is a handwritten note that appears to be a record of either the Treasury Department or the U.S. Customs House in Edenton, North Carolina. The note reads that Horatio was “promoted” to first assistant lighthouse keeper on April 26, 1877.
4. Up until some time between 1910 and 1920, the only housing on the Currituck Beach compound was the large keepers’ house. According to a document titled “Description of Buildings, Premises, Equipment, etc., at Currituck Beach Light-Station, Seacoast of North Carolina” prepared by the Department of Commerce and Labor and dated May 1, 1909, there were three keepers at the Currituck compound. The keeper had six rooms and the two assistants had three rooms each. A second house, now commonly referred to as the small keeper’s house, was constructed at the Long Point station, dismantled, floated by barge over the Currituck Sound and reassembled on the Currituck compound. Exactly when that occurred, however, is a matter of debate. As of this writing, the oral history and secondary written sources do not agree on the year the small keeper’s house appeared at the compound. It is assumed that the keepers in the photograph include Wesley and Riley because they were both living in the double keepers’ house when the photograph was taken.
5. In May of 1980, a building left behind by the Superintendent of Construction (presumably used while the lighthouse was being built) was moved to the assistant keeper’s side of the compound for use as a cook house. Office of Lighthouse Engineer to Horatio Heath, 15 May 1980, original in the hands of Beverly Wright, Sarasota, Florida.
William Simmons in Elizabeth City after leaving the lighthouse service.

Mr. Simmons with his two sons, William Roy Simmons and Josiah "Joe" Simmons.

William and Lela Simmon's daughter, Elizabeth "Bessie" Gregory Simmons.
William J. Simmons
Lela P. Simmons
Served 1895-1905

Elizabeth White Berry is the sole surviving grandchild of William and Lela Simmons. Elizabeth was born in Norfolk, Virginia, and resides there today. Nellie Craig White was married to William Thomas White, one of William and Lela's grandsons. She is a retired co-owner of Craig Brothers Marine Railway and currently lives in Norfolk as well.

Unfortunately, there seem to be no living memories of the time when William J. Simmons and his wife, Lela, lived and worked at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Nellie White who married into the Simmons family, has assiduously collected whatever government documents, photographs, newspaper clippings and other artifacts on the Simmons family she could find. And, even though Elizabeth Berry was born after her grandfather was no longer employed by the lighthouse service, she does have some childhood memories of him and her grandmother.

According to the federal records, in 1887 the Lighthouse Board gave William J. Simmons the principal keeper position at the Brant Island Shoal Lighthouse, which is located near the mouth of the Pamlico River. His wife, Lela, officially served for a short while as the second assistant at Brant Island in 1895. At first glance, it seems odd that in the days before women were allowed to vote, they were sometimes hired by the Lighthouse Board. There were, however, practical reasons why women were given positions as light keepers. Since lighthouse duty was a family effort, often women and older children knew as much as the official keeper about keeping the light burning. Upon the death of a keeper, rather than displace an entire family, the Lighthouse Board would sometimes give the keeper position to the widow, provided of course she could do the job. In Lela's case, she was not widowed, but her husband was for whatever reason left without a second assistant to help him with the light. Lela probably knew
how to operate the light and could cover the second assistant position until the Lighthouse Board could hire a male second assistant. By the time Lela was appointed second assistant to the Brant Island light, other women had set precedents as stellar light keepers. In 1856, Abigail Burgess became famous after she kept the Matinicus light burning over Penobsot Bay during a storm that was so powerful it destroyed the keeper's house. Ida Lewis was featured in a 1869 issue of Harper's Weekly because she had assisted her father with keeping the Lime Rock light in Rhode Island, during which time she made several rescues of drowning victims. In 1879, several years following her father's death, Ida was appointed the official keeper of the Lime Rock lighthouse and was so well known that President Ulysses S. Grant paid her a visit at the lighthouse. Abigail, Ida and Lela are just three examples of women who worked at lighthouses, and there were certainly others as well. It would be, however, a mistake to think that gender barriers did not exist in the light keeping service. Rather than being the norm, women keepers were the exception. Even rarer, perhaps even completely nonexistent, were African American, Asian or American Indian or other non-white keepers — male or female.

In 1895, William switched lighthouses with another keeper, Lazarus Hinnant, who was the principal keeper at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. As of this writing, we do not have any oral histories of Lazarus nor do we know of any descendants who may remember him and his time at the Currituck Beach compound. Following the switch, federal records show that William and Lela lived at the Currituck Beach compound until he retired from the Lighthouse Board employment in 1905 and took a government job in Elizabeth City. While they lived at the Currituck light, daughter, Bessie, taught school in the village of Corolla for a while. On July 3, 1901, she married Thomas Jasper White, and the Reverend Hobbs officiated over their wedding. The young couple moved to Norfolk, Virginia, where, according to the family story, Thomas had brothers who owned businesses and could offer him work.

William Simmons was a very stern, quiet man. Elizabeth remembers visiting her grandfather in Elizabeth City when she was a child. “You never saw him running around,” she recalled, “or working in the yard.” When meal time came, the entire family sat quietly at the table — no talking was allowed. On work days, William came home for lunch and then went back to work until late in the afternoon. After the evening meal, he would retire to his rocking chair and would not be disturbed by children. She remembers too that her grandparents had very few visitors and speculates it was because “that was the way he was raised [away from people] on a ship or [when] he lived at the lighthouse.” Elizabeth’s memories of her grandmother are of a very pleasant and kind woman who spent most of her time in the kitchen preparing three hot meals a day.

What was life like at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse for William and Lela? We simply do not have much historical evidence on which to draw many conclusions. We must be satisfied with these chards of memory pieced together in a partial mosaic.

2. See Elmer De Wre, Guardians of the Lights: The Men and Women of the U.S. Lighthouse Service (Sarasota, Florida: Pineapple Press, 1995) for these and other stories of women who served as light keepers.
5. Elizabeth Berry, telephone conversation, 19 August 1999.
Nathan Swain
Francis Alice Swain
Served 1905-1920

Marie Dozier Guard, Gay Stidham Doy and Carole Melvin LARGE are half-sisters and the surviving granddaughters of light keeper Captain Nathan Swain and his wife, Francis Alice Swain. Marie, born in June 1914, spent her preschool years living with her light keeper grandparents on the Currituck Beach compound. Today, she resides on her great, great grandparents' farm in Moyock, North Carolina. Gay, born in April 1922, and Carole, born in April 1931, are too young to have firsthand memories of their grandfather as a light keeper. Yet, their mother Nellie, the Swain's only daughter by birth, often spoke of what life was like on the compound. Gay and Carole have rich memories of her stories. Both Gay and Carole reside in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Nathan Swain served at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from 1905 to at least 1920, perhaps even later. In 1905, when Nathan and his wife, Alice, moved into the south side of the double keepers’ house, Wesley Austin, the first assistant keeper, and Riley Austin, the second assistant keeper, were living in the north side of the house with their families. The three keepers worked together until 1912 when Wesley was promoted to principal keeper on Ocracoke Island. After Wesley left, Riley became the first assistant keeper at Currituck Beach and, a few years later, George Johnson moved with his family into the double keepers’ house after he became second assistant. To the community, Nathan Swain was known as Captain Swain, and Alice Swain was Mrs. Captain Swain. Yet, for Marie Guard they were simply Granddaddy and Grandmother. Marie spent much of her young childhood with her grandparents at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Too young for school, Marie knew firsthand the loneliness that often accompanies lighthouse duty. She recently recalled that she spent much of her time alone “longing for somebody to play with. The Johnsons had one little boy, and I used to play with him some,
but I didn’t have any other children to play with.” Most days her companions were restricted to a Teddy bear, a doll and various lighthouse cats. She remembered going “down to the pasture every morning where we milked the cow, and the cat went with me,” no doubt the beneficiary of some free milk.5

Captain Swain’s personality emerges in relief against a backdrop of memories held by his surviving grandchildren, Marie Guard, Gay S. Day and Carole Large, the daughters of Swain’s only daughter by birth, Nellie.6 A tall, elegant man, Captain Swain put great stock in the value of education. Gay remembers her mother “talking about Granddaddy [Swain] hiring the first teacher for the [Corolla] school, and the teacher lived with them at Grandma and Grandpa’s.”7 Swain and another keeper used their own money to augment the state teacher allowance in order to draw a high-quality teacher to the village. Swain insisted that the teachers be qualified to give his daughter, Nellie, piano lessons. Swain took other pains to make sure that his only child was raised with the etiquette expected of turn-of-the century ladies, no easy task on a remote barrier island. For example, Nellie’s behavior was restricted, setting her apart from other village children. Carol remembers some of the details her mother told her about those restraints:

Mother was never allowed to go in the sun, and she wore long stockings all summer and wore long sleeves, you know, very formal dressing all the time. Not like children today...

never allowed to go barefooted. The other children on the beach there that she played with ran barefooted. They were allowed to run barefooted but her father didn’t consider that appropriate for her. She was not allowed to do that.8 Overall, Swain was a compassionate man who particularly loved animals. He kept hogs on his wife’s family farm located on the mainland near present-day Moyock, North Carolina. When it came time to kill them, however, Marie recalled that he always left “because he couldn’t stand to see the hogs killed... he just didn’t want to see anything killed, I suppose. He had raised them so he didn’t want to see them killed.”9 Hog killing time brought anticipation of fresh meat on the table, and the event was often a welcome variation in the daily routine of life on the Outer Banks. But, it was a very violent experience, and other Corolla residents found it offensive as well.

Philip Hayman (deceased), was a young boy living in Corolla during the time Captain Swain was light keeper. Hayman left behind an unpublished, yet wonderfully descriptive, autobiography describing many aspects of life in the village of Corolla. Hayman wrote of his mixed emotions about hog killing time:

When the first cold spell of weather arrived at the beginning of winter, my father would have what was known as a hog killing. To us children that was an exciting event. Not only did we welcome having fresh meat on the table, which was something we seldom had, but also
the excitement was something we looked forward to. All but the actual killing, which was something that I couldn’t bear to watch but only once. It seemed that they were not satisfied with shooting them with a rifle or knocking them down with an axe. But they always followed it up with cutting their throats with a sharp knife. This procedure to me was very brutal.

Keeping an eye on the hogs and the family farm had to be squeezed in between the long hours of lighthouse duty. Although a young child, Marie remembers being impressed with her grandfather’s rigorous work schedule. “I will tell you,” she asserted, “there was a lot of glass in the houses and every place, and that all had to be cleaned.” The work associated with the lighthouse extended to Swain’s daughter as well. During the week, Nellie was busy with school, homework and piano lessons. Carol remembers her mother telling her that:

... her mother was sick quite a lot and she [Nellie] had to do a lot of the work. She would milk the cow. She would do the ironing, and granddad wore collars that had to be starched. They heated that iron on the wood stove and starched these collars, that attached to the shirt. She would iron them, and then she would stand them up above the stove where the heat would harden them. They had to be very stiff and hard. [Nellie] had a very rigorous life. She didn’t have a lot of time to play.

The light demanded much from every family member. Captain Swain, like all the keepers of the lighthouse service, was expected to keep his grounds immaculate at all times in expectation of a visit by an inspector. The inspectors were supposed to arrive unannounced, motivating keepers to maintain the lighthouse and grounds in top shape all the time. Inspectors were powerful, holding nearly unchecked discretion in assigning bad marks as well as making nominations for awards. The highest award was the Superintendent’s Star and was given for exemplary performance.

Like many people in positions of power, the inspectors were sometimes respected and often feared. Stories of inspections bespeak of arduous affairs, unwelcome interruptions in the daily routine of the light keepers’ families. Some inspectors went so far as to wear white gloves to search out dirt. They looked in every nook and cranny, from the lighthouse to the keepers’ quarters. Contents of drawers and cupboards had to be neatly arranged, and failure to meet minimum standards resulted in a bad mark against the keeper. Since the lighthouse, keepers’ quarters, supplies, tools and other equipment were property of the federal government, they were inventoried to make sure that all the contents were accounted for. The keepers’ records were reviewed to make sure the keeper was frugal with government supplies.

Upon arrival, the inspector expected to be greeted by the keeper dressed in uniform and the keeper’s wife clean and neatly dressed. Wives and children often found the arrival of the inspector distressful. Several cases from Elinor DeWire’s book, Guardians of the Lights, illustrate the power inspectors had over the keepers. For example, Marie Carr, a woman who lived with her keeper husband at Long Island Sound’s Little Gull Light during the 1920s, made sure the inspector was greeted by freshly scrubbed children, a spotless kitchen and a house filled with the smell of muffins, pie or bread. For children, the inspectors could
To Illuminate the Dark Space

seem larger than life. As a young boy at Libby Islands Light in Maine, Philmore Wass recalled that he confused an inspector named Luther with God. “I thought they were the same,” he once said, “the only difference being that Luther occasionally appeared in uniform.” Joe St. Andre, who grew up in various Great Lakes lighthouses, remembered that the inspector “was like probably the second coming of the Lord.”

At the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, when Captain Swain was on duty, the experience with the inspector was quite different from the norm. Inspector W. J. Tate and Captain Swain were fast friends. Marie recalled that when Tate arrived to inspect the compound, it was a happy occasion filled with companionship, and he would always stay the night with her grandparents. When asked if she or her grandfather feared Mr. Tate, Marie replied, that, to the contrary, he was just like one of the family. After the inspection, Swain’s family and Tate would visit around a big table in the keepers’ quarters, perhaps taking in a meal. On one particular day, Marie was sitting at that table with her stuffed toy bear named Ted and scribbling on a piece of paper. Tate inquired about what she was doing, and Marie explained that she was just writing to Ted’s folks, perhaps mimicking what she had seen her grandparents do in the evening. Tate must have been charmed by Marie’s youthful seriousness because he always remembered that incident and reminded Marie of it often as she grew older. The Corolla keepers may have been able to maintain a close, friendly relationship with the inspector because, unlike other lighthouse inspectors, Tate lived just across the sound from the Currituck Beach Lighthouse in the community of Coinjock. Although separated by a large, freshwater sound, the village of Corolla and the town of Coinjock were close-knit communities.

Just as Captain Swain and W.J. Tate were friends, so were Alice and Tate’s wife, Sophia. Also, like her husband, Alice loved animals and could not bear to see them suffer. When Marie was a young child, she picked up one or two of her grandmother’s cats and dropped them on a hot stove. Marie recalled that her “grandmother grabbed them up, doctored their feet, and then she went to work on me.” On that occasion, and many other times when she raised her grandmother’s wrath, Marie fled for the safe harbor of her grandfather’s study. As long as she was in the company of her grandfather, he would protect her from the discipline of her grandmother. On this particular occasion, Mrs. Swain called up the stairs to Marie, warning her she could stay up there for a while, but eventually she would have to come down and take her punishment.

Captain Swain was not, however, as gentle with his own daughter. Gay remembers her mother telling her about the many times she was whipped by her father. Carol figures that Captain Swain and his daughter...
GENERAL APPOINTMENT—WITHOUT FIXED DATE

Department of Commerce and Labor
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington

September 19, 1905.

Mr. Nathan E. Swain of North Carolina is hereby appointed 
Keeper of the Currituck Beach Light-Station, North Carolina,
in the Light-House Service,
with compensation at the rate of 750 dollars per annum,
this appointment to take effect on October 1, 1905,
or as soon thereafter as he enters on duty. (vice William J. Simmons.)

Payment of the compensation authorized in this appointment is subject
to the oath of office being taken.

(By transfer and promotion from Keeper of the North River Light-Station,
North Carolina, at $560 per annum.)

Respectfully forwarded:

Henry W. B. M.
Commander, U. S. N.,
Light-House Inspector.

Assistant Secretary

The Light-House Board.

E.
D.

LIGHT HOUSE BOARD
SEP 20
1905
Received.
often clashed because they were so much alike. "My mother was a fireball ... and so was [Granddaddy]."17

Before Nellie was born, Captain Swain and his wife suffered many lost pregnancies. "My mother was the last one," Carol recalled, "and she lived." With every pregnancy, Alice would optimistically make clothes, tiny garments that she would never be able to use. With her last pregnancy, she seemed to give up hope. Expecting the worst, or perhaps out of superstition, she did not make clothes for what would turn out to be her last, and only, baby. Marie recalled that:

Grandmother sewed beautifully, and she had made clothes for the others [those pregnancies that ended in miscarriage or stillbirth] before they were born because they were born years apart. So when mother was born alive, she didn’t have any [clothes.] She said she wasn’t going to make any clothes because there wasn’t any need of it. She knew the baby would be born dead or die, you know, soon thereafter. So when the baby was born and they had nothing to put on her, Grandpa went to the country store and all he could buy was this little, teeny, tiny blue and white check gingham. So her first dresses were made of blue and white check gingham. They put colors on babies today, but, see, they used to not put colors on babies. They used to wear white ... they wore nice long white dresses.

Although Nellie was the only infant to survive childbirth, she was not the Swain’s only child. Generous in spirit, the Swains took in various foster children during their tenure at the lighthouse. At the time of this writing, little has been discovered of who these children were and what became of them. Yet, the Swain’s efforts to provide good teachers for the youngsters of this wild barrier island and their unselfish willingness to make a home for orphaned children remain an enduring legacy in Corolla’s community memory and shines as bright as the Swain’s dedication to the light.

1. There is some discrepancy between the oral evidence and the written records on the dates of Captain Swain’s service at the Currituck Light. Carole Large, Swain’s granddaughter, believes that Swain served from 1905 to 1917. According to the 1920 Federal Census, Captain Swain was still serving at the lighthouse as late as 1920. Family memories may fail but census records are also often wrong.


3. Ibid.

4. Their mother, Nellie, was widowed before she was 20 years old. Her husband contracted typhoid fever on the family farm in Moyock, so Nellie had to leave Marie with her grandparents at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse while she went to secretary school in Norfolk. Nellie remarried, and by the time Gay and Carole were born, Marie no longer lived with her grandparents.


7. Marie Guard interview, 18 June 1999. The farm, incidentally, had belonged to Captain Swain’s wife’s parents and was located on the mainland near present-day Moyock.

8. Heyman, Philip Ray, I Remember. (Unpublished manuscript: Currituck County, no date.) Philip was born in 1905 in Corolla, North Carolina. This is his unpublished autobiography containing reminiscences of his childhood in Corolla.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 53.

13. Quoted in Ibid.


15. Ibid.


Garner George Johnson
Lucy Johnson
Served: 1916-1920

Inez Johnson is a retired bookkeeper. She was born in 1934 and grew up in Coinjock, North Carolina. She is the widow of Alvin Johnson who was the grandson of two keepers, William Riley Austin and George Johnson. Donnie Johnson was born in 1959 and is the great granddaughter of William Riley Austin and George Johnson. She grew up on the Outer Banks and lives there today working restaurant business.

Unfortunately, there are no surviving children or grandchildren who can tell us what life was like for George Johnson while he was one of the keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. The Federal records indicate that George Johnson was the second assistant keeper in 1916 and 1917 and that he lived with his wife, Lucy, in the double keepers' house with their three sons, Marvin, Alson and Jesse. While the details are few about George and Lucy during those years, Inez remembers the old keeper in his later years. Inez is not a so-called blood relative of George Johnson, but she loved him like blood. Inez married into George's family when she wed Alvin, one of George's grandsons. Alvin's father was George and Lucy's youngest son, Jesse. Alvin's mother was Fannie Austin Johnson, born to Riley and Lovie Austin at the Currituck Beach compound. After Inez married Alvin in 1954, they would visit George who, by that time, had retired from the Old Point Comfort Lighthouse in Fort Monroe, Virginia. The exact date George left the Currituck Beach compound is uncertain, but it is believed to have been around 1920. After he left Currituck Beach, he moved to the Old Point light where he worked for 21 years before retiring.

Inez Johnson's generation was the last to grow up during a period in American history when the sea was almost exclusively the domain of men while women stayed ashore taking care of the children. Inez's family had long been established on the Outer Banks, and she was accustomed to being around men who made their living on the water. Her father and one of her grandfathers were commercial fishermen, and her other grandfather was a tug boat captain. As she succinctly stated, "I was raised on money that came from the water." So, it is not surprising that she had a deep respect for George, a man who had spent most of his life keeping the light burning for the men on the water. She first met George in the mid-1950s after he had matured into the
A photo of Alvin Johnson, age 3 or 4, taken at Corolla.

traditional, romantic look commonly associated with light keepers. “He was tall,” recalled Inez, with a “white mustache, gray hair — [a] handsome, distinguished-looking man.” He was, she remembered, very health-conscious and careful about the kinds of food he ate. George was lean and carried himself “straight as a pin.” He was the kind of person who was enjoyable to talk with. According to Inez, “he was alert, concerned and interested in anything anyone had to say.” George lives on in memory as well as any of us could hope to be remembered. He was, in the words of Inez, “a wonderful man . . . I was crazy about him.”

Loren Edward Tillett
Esmeralda Midgette Tillett
Served 1921-1930

Vilma Smith was born in 1914 in Wanchese, North Carolina, and is the oldest surviving daughter of Loren and Esmeralda Tillett. She resides in Norfolk, Virginia, with her sister, Anna Mae Hickman, who was born in 1924. Loren Edward Tillett, Jr., is the oldest son of Loren and Esmeralda and also resides in Norfolk, Virginia. Both Anna Mae and Loren were born on the Currituck Beach compound. Vilma, Anna Mae and Loren spent their entire childhoods at various lighthouses on the East Coast; many of those years were at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

The story of Loren Edward Tillett and his wife, Esmeralda, is one of triumph of grace over heart-sickening grief. As a young couple, Loren and Esmeralda experienced what any person who makes a living on the water fears the most: the drowning death of a child. A powerful story, the death of Loren and Esmeralda’s child is told by Loren Edward, their oldest surviving son:

My dad [was assigned] to the Potomac River Lighthouse in Maryland. Merle [their daughter] was about five or six years old, and she fell off of the lighthouse into the water. My dad saw her fall. He jumped over and tried to save her, but the Potomac river being as swift as it is, it was hard for him to catch her. Well, he finally got to her.

He had her on his back and he was swimming toward the shore. He hollered to my mother who was at the top of the lighthouse and she threw him over a safety line but she didn’t hold on to the other end. So he couldn’t be pulled in. She [mother] immediately got into the row boat that the light-houses had and she was going to row out to get him. But in the meantime, she [Merle] was so heavy — she was a heavy little lady — and she was drowning him. He couldn’t stay afloat with her, so he had to push her away and watch her drown. That was horrible. Of course it would have been horrible for her, you know. Well when my mother got to him with the boat —
of course it was too late — and he almost, getting in the boat, almost tipped it over and would have drowned both of them. He was able to get into the boat. About four or five days later, they found her [Merle’s body] washed up on the shore there in Maryland.\textsuperscript{1}

The loss of a child is wrenching at any age or under any circumstances; yet, Merle’s untimely death was particularly heartbreaking. Merle was in those tender preschool years, a time when children begin to emerge as social beings and start carving out their own niches in the family dynamics. She was at the age when a little girl often becomes “Daddy’s girl.” Loren’s guilt must have been nearly maddening, unmitigated by the cerebral knowledge that Merle’s death was accidental but that he had to push her away or they both would have drowned. The tragedy became a life-altering event for Loren and Esmeralda and set the tone for the rest of their family life. It could hardly do less.

After Merle died, Loren staggered under the weight of grief, sinking into a deep depression. “My Dad,” summed up his son, “had sort of a nervous breakdown.”\textsuperscript{2} Vilma remembers that her father stayed in bed and cried a lot. When asked what helped her father overcome the accident, she replied simply, “I think he prayed.” Eventually, both Loren and Esmeralda were able to find peace by giving themselves over God, another life-altering event, which usually happens in a specific and memorable moment of time, often referred to as “finding the Lord.”\textsuperscript{3}

Loren Edward said that, after the accident, his father “couldn’t stand it up there [on the Potomac] anymore.”\textsuperscript{4} Every day must have been torture as Loren and Esmeralda watched the waters of the Potomac incessantly flowing under the lighthouse, reminding them of that terrible day Merle slipped away in those same waters. The lighthouse service got Loren and

\textbf{Loren Tillett, Esmeralda, Merle (center, who died) and Vilma.}

Esmeralda out of there by transferring them to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Loren and Esmeralda moved to the Currituck Light in 1921 and allowed the years to cushion the pain of Merle’s death, settling into making a life for themselves and their growing family. They found communion and fellowship within the walls of the nearby Corolla chapel. In the spring, they planted a garden and grew greens, butter beans, corn and tomatoes. In the fall, Loren was an avid duck hunter, which provided meat for his family. He also enjoyed gigging giant bull frogs on the sound, and as Anna Mae remembers they were delicious.\textsuperscript{5} Farm animals were not allowed on the Currituck Beach compound, so in his spare time Loren built pens behind the small keeper’s house just outside of the grounds where he raised cows, chickens and pigs. Loren threw himself into his work as principal keeper at Currituck. Anna Mae remembers being aware, even as a little girl, of how hard her father worked. She would “watch
Daddy go up to the lighthouse. . . . I tell you he walked those steps many a day, many a day. We would watch him go up and down, and we would play around the side of the lighthouse."

Although Loren was obviously a dedicated light keeper, to hear his children speak of him today, it becomes abundantly clear that they were his first priority. Determined to never again lose a child to the water, Loren and Esmeralda used Merle's legacy and stories of boogeymen to keep their curious youngsters away from the ocean and sound. They told the children repeatedly about how dangerous the water was and about the day Merle drowned. Anna Mae remembers her parents telling her that Corolla's seaside fishing shacks housed bums and tramps who would get you if you wandered too close.\(^5\) The prospect of being gotten was perhaps worse than drowning, a dark and nebulous threat intended to keep the kids away from the water's edge. As children will do, however, Anna Mae and Loren Edward decided one day to test the veracity of their parents' stories. They snuck off to the forbidden shore. Anna remembers that "daddy went looking for us; mama said she didn't know where we were. [After he found us on the beach] he scared us all the way home with a goose. He had the goose up over his head, like this, and he was quacking like a goose and us kids was a-squirming."\(^6\) Loren Edward also remembers that day well: "I remember my daddy came across the sand hill and out on the beach behind that lighthouse. [Daddy was] hollering and scuffing like a goose with this goose on his head trying to scare us kids. We were running all over trying to get to the house because he was scaring us, you know?"

Loren was an especially loving father. Anna Mae remembers her father "would come in from the lighthouse, and he would make us gingerbread cookies. He was a good cook. He could cook as good as our mother. He would make these cookies, and he would lay them all out on the table, and he'd cut them. We were little, and we would sneak up and get some of the raw dough because it was good."\(^7\) When he was off duty, Loren would get down on the floor
and play with his children. They would lay down on his feet while he pulled them around the house as they squealed with joy. During nice weather, Loren tossed a ball with his kids or allowed them to play in the garden while he hoed or weeded. Anna Mae remembers that on any given day, you could look out in the lighthouse yard and see Loren striding across the compound with one of his kids on his shoulders. If the day was windy, he made the kids homemade kites from cloth, sticks and string. One evening he tied little Loren Edward’s kite up on a stump where it was supposed to fly all night while the little boy slept. But, sometime before the dawn, the kite slipped free of its earthly bond. Little Loren Edward must have been disappointed the next day to find his kite gone. “So he [Daddy] got his little boat,” recalled Anna Mae, “and he went across the sound side and got Loren Edward’s kite and brought it back.”

Now, this was no quick jaunt. The sound crossing was about four miles or so and depending on the weather took about an hour to navigate. Keepers only made the trip occasionally, usually for an important errand such as getting supplies. But, on that particular day, for a father who himself had lost too much too young, his little boy’s lost kite was reason enough to row across Currituck Sound.

Tragic, and over too soon, in the end, Merlo’s short life was not wasted. Her memory lived on in Loren and Esmeralda, and the bitterness of her early demise made the time with their other children that much sweeter.

The Currituck Beach Lighthouse compound was a place of serious business as mandated by the Federal Government, and Loren worked to keep the light burning for thousands of mariners who depended upon its steady beacon to avert disaster. Yet, because families lived there, the Currituck Beach compound was also a place to make a home, give birth to children, celebrate joy and overcome sorrow. The lighthouse was much more than simply a place to work. For Loren and Esmeralda, it was also a place to heal, to move on in service to a higher power and to learn to love again.

2. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
Homer Treadwell Austin
Orphia Midgett Austin
Served 1928-1936

Mildred Gray, born in 1918, is a daughter of lighthouse keeper Homer T. and Orphia Austin. During her childhood, her father served as a light keeper at Bodie Island, Newport News and Currituck Beach. Mildred spent many years at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, and her most vivid childhood memories are rooted there. She spent most of her adult years in Satellite Beach, Florida, and recently moved back to Wanchese, North Carolina. Estelle Wilson, daughter of Sibyl Gates, was born in 1930 and is a grandchild of Homer and Orphia. She lived with her light keeper grandparents until she was 7 and has many childhood memories of life at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Her son, John Wilson, IV, founded the Outer Bank Conservationists, Inc. and is a restoration architect responsible for the restoration of the Currituck Beach compound. Estelle currently resides with her husband, John Wilson, III, at the Mother Vineyard in Manteo, North Carolina.

Homer Treadwell Austin was born in Trent (present-day Frisco), North Carolina, in the early spring of 1881. He grew up surrounded by seven brothers and sisters and spent his early adult years fishing the waters of the Outer Banks. On June 13, 1907, he married Orphia Davis Midgett in Bethany United Methodist Church in Wanchese, North Carolina. Later that same year, Homer won a position with the lighthouse service. By the fall, he and Orphia moved from the land of their youth to a screw pile lighthouse in the Chesapeake Bay known as Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.1 While fall in Maryland had plenty of warm days, the months were rapidly melting into winter, the most dangerous season for keepers of Thomas Point Shoal. Free-drifting chunks of ice could clip a light tower from its pilings, plunging it to the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay.2

Also, life for the families on screw pile lights was generally more difficult than at land-based lighthouses. They were cut off from the
outside world. Simple things like mail service, drinking water, fresh vegetables and groceries were difficult to obtain. Living quarters were perpetually damp, and food spoiled quickly in the sultry interior air. Screw pile light stations could also be difficult for newlyweds like Homer and Orphia because they were often "stag stations," meaning that women and children were not allowed. If that was the case for Thomas Point Shoal, then Orphia and Homer would have spent considerable time apart from one another.

In April of 1928, Homer became first assistant keeper at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. By this time, Orphia had given birth to eight children: Ellice E, who was stillborn, Sibyl Gates, Sidney Montez, Marretta Mae, Mildred Dea, Homer Treadwell, Jr., Hilda Ann and Lovie who died the day she was born. Homer and Orphia also had an adopted son, Willie. The Austin family had a home in Manteo about 35 miles away by land, but it appears they lived at least part of the time on the lighthouse compound. Homer and Orphia's daughter Sidney did not like living at the lighthouse because she felt it was too isolated. She was, after all, a young woman of courting age, and the prospects for romance were probably rather slim in the Corolla village. Conversely, one of Sidney's sisters, Mildred, has many fond memories of this period of her life. Mill, as everybody called her, was a 10-year-old bona fide tomboy and ideally suited for the outdoor life at the Currituck Beach compound. The French philosopher Rousseau believed that every child possesses unique talents, but they need physical and intellectual freedom to fully develop those talents. Rousseau's ideal could find no better expression than Mill's childhood at Currituck Beach. Homer and Orphia gave her licence to roam the wild and sandy landscape of the upper Outer Banks while her father tended the light. Mill's two best friends and running pals were her sister Marretta (Ret) and Evelyn Lewark whose parents ran the Knight House, a private hunting club known today as the Whalehead Club, situated near the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

Mill had all the accoutrements associated with childhood on the Outer Banks: a row boat, fishing net, carving knife, BB gun and slingshot. She made the slingshot herself, carved out of a tree branch with her knife. The boat was a gift from the sea, with some help from her father. Homer came upon the little dinghy on the beach one day, probably washed ashore from misfortune at sea. He dragged it home, repaired the damage, then painted and outfitted it with a set of oars and a gill net. Mill loved that little boat and reminisced that she used to go up into the Knight's place and set the net and catch a lot of fish — freshwater fish: round robins, perch, all kinds. Then I'd clean them up and go out through the neighborhood and sell them 10 cents a dozen. So, I really enjoyed my growin' up in the lighthouse service.

While the boat never brought Mill grief, the slingshot got her into trouble. Mill and Edward Quidley, the son of a fellow keeper, used to get blazing mad at each other. One day after Edward made Mill particularly angry, she bunkered down like a soldier and started firing lead pellets at his pet mallard with her slingshot. She was just acting out her anger at Edward, but unfortunately the duck paid the price with his life. Mill did not mean to kill the bird, and in her childlike simplicity she was surprised to find the little creature dead. Lack of murderous intention, however, did not mitigate her punishment. "Oh," she recalled, "Mama beat me up... she tore me up." That was also the last day Mill ever saw her slingshot. Keepers worked and lived in very close quarters. There was no escape from your co-workers on a lighthouse compound. Without a degree of civility between the keepers and their offspring, life could quickly become intolerable for everyone.
involved. Parents likely felt a good deal of social pressure to deal with their children's transgressions swiftly and harshly in order to keep the peace.

Schedules were as important as discipline in the daily rhythm of the Austin life. The job of a light keeper was by nature repetitious. Keepers did not have the opportunity to be creative in their work or even change their schedules very much. Certain duties were performed at particular times as listed in the handbook provided by the Bureau of Light-houses. Yet, Homer and Orphia did not seem yoked by their regulated days; instead, they thrived in the light keeper's lifestyle. While Homer's daily schedule was established by the mandates of his job, Orphia's daily routine was ordered by the logistics of raising a large family. With so many children and a grandchild in their care, routine and scheduling must have been paramount to maintaining sanity. Like her husband's job, Orphia's household ran on a strict timetable. She prepared three meals everyday and served the family in the dining room of the double keepers' house. Every Saturday, a treat, often a multilayered chocolate cake, was baked for dinner the next day. The cake was never, ever touched before noon on Sunday. Orphia washed clothes every Monday and ironed on Tuesdays. "It really had to be raining hard," Estelle recalled, "[to get] off schedule... because that was our schedule." 

Orphia cooked with such precision that there were never leftovers to be eaten the next day. This is not to say, however, that the fare was slim. Estelle remembered they had three large meals a day and regularly had hearty dishes like fried chicken, seafood, beef hash, roast beef, eggs and fresh vegetables. The bread was always biscuits or corn bread, never loaf bread.

The kitchen was Orphia's command center, and the business of the house emanated from that room. Estelle's earliest memories of the women in her life, particularly her grandmother, were that they worked hard in the kitchen. Her grandmother was "always in the kitchen in a house dress and apron." Orphia's parlor was off limits except to entertain company. The dining room was for eating meals, and the sitting room was for reading and quiet time. The real action in the house happened in the kitchen. If a child wanted permission to do something, they
made an appeal to the kitchen. As Estelle put it, ‘‘My grandmother was head of the household in those days. She said what you [could] do and what you [could] not do.’’

Orphia was indisputably a very good cook. When asked if there was any food she did not like, Estelle replied, ‘‘Sometimes we’d have duck eggs instead of chicken eggs. The duck egg was real large and the yolk was deep orange... yeah, that was bad.’’ Estelle’s only real complaint from her childhood was that sometimes there was simply too much food. Orphia served up the portions, and you were expected to eat every morsel. ‘‘I had to sit [at the table] sometimes after Hilda [Orphia’s youngest daughter] could go on out and play.’’ Estelle was a frail child and remembers that Homer and Orphia always put her in the front seat in the family automobile in order to ease her chronic car sickness. Orphia was, perhaps, concerned about her granddaughter’s slight build and tried to put some weight on her, a safety net in case of serious illness. Today, it is easy to forget that the threat of diseases such as influenza, polio or malaria was very real when Estelle was a young child. A vaccine for polio would not be approved until 1954. And only recently have vaccines become available for certain types of influenza. In the mid-1930s, by the time Estelle was old enough to start school, thousands of Americans died each year from malaria, and most of these fatalities occurred in the mosquito- ridden southern states. So, Orphia would have been keenly aware that a small child, with few pounds to spare, could not afford a serious illness. Yet, from Estelle’s perspective, the large portions of heavy food served as regular as clockwork were often too much for her young, sensitive stomach.

Homer is one of the few light keepers with several surviving offspring, all of whom have many remembrances of their lives as lighthouse children. Perhaps one day, before the opportunity has slipped away, a full-sized book will be written on the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, and all their living memories will find a place in print. Until then, Mill’s childhood memory nicely sums up a little girl’s experience living at Currituck Beach Lighthouse in the 1930s:

My fondest memory of my childhood was living at Corolla with my boat and my paddling and taking kids out for a boat ride, and stuff like that. I enjoyed that. And driving up and down the beach, and having a good time.

1. Greg Wilson Williams, Esq., The Family of Homer Treadwell Austin and Orphia Davis Midgett (unpublished, November 1993). 2. Greg is the son of Hilda Austin Williams and the grandson of Homer T. Austin. He’s the coauthor of the book, Tar Heel Maps, which can be seen on the internet by going to www.ncwc.edu then typing in Gregory W. Williams.


3. D’id., 37, 38.

4. Data were compiled from the National Archives, Washington, D.C., by Currituck Beach Lighthouse staff under the supervision of Lloyd Chidress, Executive Director and Lighthouse Keeper.


7. Ibid.

8. The Federal Records do not list a “Quidley” as lighthouse keeper at Currituck Beach. The incident Mill refers to here may have happened at Newport News. She lived at Newport News between the ages of 2 and 8.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Both Estelle and Mill remember that Orphia was a very good cook.

14. Ibid.

15. See Albert E. Cowdry, This Land This South: An Environmental History (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983), for discussion of the impact of diseases on the American South.

James B. Cox
Dora Cox
Served 1930-1936

Byrdie Raye Midgett Lanier was born on July 21, 1925. Her maternal grandfather, James B. Cox, was a light keeper at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse between 1930 and 1936. James was married to Dora Midgett Cox, Byrdie’s maternal grandmother. Byrdie’s mother was Clara, the middle child of James and Dora’s five children. Others, in order, were Gladys, Charles, Geneva and Jerry. Byrdie is one of the few people in her family with memories of her grandparents when they lived in the large keepers’ house on the compound.

Born in the last half of the 19th century, James and Dora Cox lived during a unique period in American history. Their generation witnessed a major transition from animal power to machine power. By the time James was keeper at the Currituck Light, he owned two automobiles. His granddaughter, Byrdie, remembers he called his car “Lizzie” and his truck “Henry.” He probably named Lizzie after the famous “tin lizzie” Model T and Henry after the automobile magnate Henry Ford himself. For James, the past held memories of a time when land transportation was by horse or mule, living creatures endowed with pet names. So it was natural for him to bestow titles upon his motorized beasts of burden, a familiar ritual in a rapidly changing world. The impact modernization had upon everything from lighthouses to transportation to warfare cannot be overstated. James and Dora were reared on the Outer Banks and would have been among the first people to hear about Wilbur and Orville’s first flight in 1903 near Kitty Hawk. Just more than two decades later, Charles Lindbergh, Jr., helped usher in the age of air travel when he made the first transatlantic solo flight. When James and Dora were born, women did not have the right to vote, and in some states married women still could not own property, make a contract or even sign a will. James and Dora would have followed the news as Congress took the final constitutional step to universal suffrage in 1920. A few years later, they heard about Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, and watched as she became an inspiration to other women quietly and noisily agitating for equal civil rights.

Of all the events that came to pass in James and Dora’s lives, however, World War I was undoubtedly the most striking evidence that the world of their youth had changed forever. WWI was the first wide-scale modern
war, and by the time it was over, the total cost was close to two billion dollars and perhaps as many as 40 million lives. The war’s utter destruction eroded confidence in science, ended notions of European superiority and shattered Enlightenment faith in human reason. People reeled with unanswered questions centering around how rational people could wreck such devastation upon themselves. For answers, many people turned to belief systems that explained and justified the condition of the secular world.  

James and Dora Cox, like many of their generation, found refuge in their religion and were deeply committed to their spiritual well being. They were staunch Primitive Baptist. It was, after all, almost impossible to be anything but staunch; there was no such thing as a lukewarm Primitive Baptist. The Primitive Baptist doctrine held that certain people were destined for salvation, and the church required absolute loyalty from its constituents. Certain pleasures such as dancing and tobacco smoking were forbidden, and waiver from the strict moral code could get you brought up before the church to explain your actions. The highest aim of Christianity, according to Primitive Baptists, was to return to the spirit of the New Testament and emulate the life and times of Jesus Christ. They practiced New Testament rituals such as foot-washing, which in the words of one former Primitive Baptist was the “most loving, caring, humble ceremonies I have ever been involved in.” James was endowed with a beautiful voice and led the Primitive Baptist church choir in Kitty Hawk, about 20 miles down the beach from Currituck Beach. Although they met only one day out of the month, that day was completely committed to the business of worship and fellowship. In an uncertain world, the Primitive Baptist church was a safe haven.

Christmas was a time for the Cox clan to gather together at the lighthouse compound, and for many years Byrdie relished being the only young child in the family. Christmas was James and Dora’s favorite season, filled with worship, music and good food — a sacred time of inspiration, awe and sharing. On one particular Christmas, Byrdie’s father, John Midgett, dressed up as Santa Claus to hand out the presents. Byrdie, who received an Orphan Annie watch that year, did not recognize her own father and remained convinced it was Santa in the flesh standing before her. Christmas was time for the Cox family to share with others as well. James and Dora’s kids often brought friends home to the lighthouse to join in the festivities. Byrdie remembers she “was always so happy when they [my uncles, aunts and their friends] came to wake me up... it was a happy time.” The keepers’ house would fill with the smells of good cooking as Dora made multilayered chocolate cakes, coconut pies and sweet potato biscuits that would melt in your mouth. She was such a wonderful cook, claims Byrdie, that “she could make the best corn bread out of nothing, it seemed like.”

Christmas was not the only time the Cox family gathered together. Whenever there was a family decision to be made, or if someone in family was in trouble or having family problems, everyone gathered together at the Currituck compound to figure out a way to solve the problem or help the family member in trouble. James Cox was the undisputed patriarch of the family, and Byrdie idolized him. He was always kind and gentle with her, and she was crushed whenever she disappointed him. Byrdie recalled that “the first time my Grandpapa, whom I adored, ever gave me a little spank — broke my heart — was when my cousin] Sylvia was asleep upstairs [in the double keepers’ house] and I wouldn’t be quiet. Grandpapa came down those stairs as I was being sent up, and he gave me one little pat on the bottom. It broke my heart.” Yet, her high regard for her
grandfather did not preclude her helping her mother and aunts out every once in a while. James disapproved of cigarette smoking, but his daughters, who came of age when women were beginning to explore their new independence, liked to smoke and apparently did so on a regular basis. Whenever the sisters came to visit at the lighthouse, out of respect for their father they would sneak out to the outhouse to smoke. It was a very nice privy, complete with separate facilities for men and women and a small porch. While the women were inside smoking and chatting, little Byrdie stood guard on the deck, ready to sound a discrete alarm if her grandfather should come their way. One evening, Byrdie recalled, “He finally told me ‘would you please tell your mother and the girls if they want to smoke, come up to the house and smoke.’ That was all he ever said.”

Ultimately, you cannot understand James and Dora Cox and the tenor of daily family life at the Currituck Beach compound without understanding their religious underpinnings. In Primitive Baptist fashion, Dora was dedicated to her husband. In Byrdie’s words, “She was a tiny little lady, and Grandpapa was it, you know?” During a time in American history when white, middle-class women were for the first time shedding oppressive clothing, driving automobiles, smoking and working outside of the home, Dora “never knew what it was to do anything but keep house and cook.” James was the undisputed head of the household and even personally bought all of Dora’s clothes and shoes. Byrdie remembers that her grandfather’s duties keeping the light at Currituck and taking care of his family were done with joy, simply as part of his greater Christian life purpose. “My grandfather,” Byrdie sums it up, “was a kind gentleman, a Christian man. Being a lighthouse keeper might not have had anything to do with it [his integrity]. He felt he was serving his purpose.”

3. Michael Tutterow, Senior Minister of Winter Park Baptist Church, personal conversation with author, 2 August 1999.
5. Ibid.
7. Sweet potatoes were a staple crop for farmers across the sound, and the fall season, just before Christmas, was the prime time to dig potatoes. Haynes, Philip Ray, I Remember. (Unpublished autobiography containing reminiscences of his childhood in Corolla: Currituck County, no date.) Philip was born in 1905 in Corolla, North Carolina.
9. Ibid.
In the late 1930s, William (Bill) Lindsay worked with Captain W.J. Tate maintaining the aids to navigation, which included charging the batteries at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse once a week. Bill Lindsay was born in Coinjock, North Carolina, in 1915 and lives there today with his wife, Elizabeth Marshall Lindsay. William Corey Tate, born in 1969, is the great grandson of William James Tate. Corey owns an electrical business and lives with his wife, Patricia Palmer Tate, and three children in Coinjock, North Carolina.

Elijah Sibbern worked as a surfman at the Kitty Hawk Station of the United States Life-Saving Service in the mid-1800s. One night, while his wife was in the process of giving birth, Elijah was called to assist the crew of the Addie Medley, a ship foundering off the Outer Banks. We will never know what it was, but certainly something happened during the rescue that profoundly touched Elijah because he named his newborn daughter after the wrecked ship. Her namesake would become a foreshadowing of the rest of her life. Addie Medley Sibbern grew up with a spirit that resembled an offshore storm, energetic and loquacious. As the fates would have it, she married the son of a shipwrecked sailor, William James (W.J.) Tate.¹

Even before Addie Melody was born, Elijah had come to the assistance of another vessel in trouble. The B.M. Prescott encountered a storm off Cape Henry, Virginia, and was finally driven into the surf near Kitty Hawk. Elijah pulled William D. Tate and his brother from the pounding waves. Both brothers ended up staying on the Outer Banks, and William D. Tate married Sophia Toler, a local woman. Sophia gave birth to a son they named William James Tate. She died while W.J. was just a boy, and his father became his sole care-giver. Then tragedy struck again. In 1880, William was found dead in his sailboat on the Currituck Sound, leaving 10-year-old W.J. an orphan. With no family to take him in, W.J. was sent to a school for orphaned boys operated by the Masons in the North Carolina piedmont region. He received a good education, and when he turned 21, W.J. made his way back to the Outer Banks to claim his inheritance. His father had left him a sizable tract of land in Kitty Hawk, but he had to deed about half of it over to the federal government in order to satisfy the taxes that had been accruing since he was a boy.² W.J.'s arrival at Kitty Hawk must have been bittersweet for him,
simultaneously a homecoming and a reminder of his parents’ deaths.

It would seem natural for W.J. to turn to Elijah Sibbern for friendship. Elijah would have known Sophia and William well before they died. After all, Sophia had grown up on the Outer Banks, and Elijah was the person who pulled William from the raging surf so many years earlier. Elijah probably had dozens of tales to share with W.J. about his parents. One can easily imagine W.J. spending a great deal of time with Elijah, listening over and over to these stories. Memories, stories and his inheritance would have been all W.J. had to remember his family. Given Elijah’s history with Sophia and William, perhaps no one was surprised when W.J. began courting Elijah’s daughter, Addie. Their romance had an element of poetry since W.J. owed his very existence to a ship that foundered in a storm, then he fell in love with a woman named after a shipwreck.3

Corey Tate, one of W.J. and Addie’s great grandsons, has done a great deal of research on his family’s history. Over the years, he has assembled an impressive collection of family papers, photographs and artifacts. When asked to talk about what his great grandmother, Addie Medley Tate, was like, he described her like this:

She was basically my great grandfather’s biggest fan. She supported him and she raised the family, of course. That was her main objective in life, to raise her family. [She was a] very outspoken individual. She said whatever was on her mind. One thing that I remember that my dad [said about her] — ‘cause my dad barely remembers her too, ‘cause she died just two years after my great grandfather did — she used to hate people who smoked cigarettes. [According to Addie], people who used to smoke cigarettes was fire at one end and fool at the other [laughter]! That’s what she used to say about them. She was very outspoken in her later years.

... You know, [she was] just a member of the community. Nothing that was extremely noteworthy, other than all great people everywhere [like W.J. Tate] had some type of person probably just like her behind them. Somebody who was never really in the limelight but who made major contributions to the upbringing, and the, I guess, moral education of a lot of great people. So I guess history relegated her role to that.4

It is true that W.J. Tate was in the
William James Tate • 1937-1940
William (Bill) D. Lindsay • 1937-1939

limelight more than his wife. He was the person who responded to Orville and Wilbur Wright’s general inquiry about the weather conditions in Kitty Hawk for testing a flying machine. W.J. invited the Wright brothers to Kitty Hawk, gave them a place to stay and helped them assemble their first glider in his front yard. Years later, W.J. gained a degree of fame for his close friendship with the Wrights. He became a local leader serving in public office and agitating for more science courses in schools. Addie, like most women of her generation, worked in the home cooking, cleaning and making clothes for her family. Yet, embedded in Corey’s memory is a description of a lively, intelligent and candid woman. During a time when talk of human flight seemed preposterous to many people, Addie opened her home to two strangers from Ohio. She loaned the Wright brothers her sewing machine so they could stitch the skin of their first glider, a favor for which they were quite grateful. After Orville and Wilbur dismantled the glider, they gave the sateen wing coverings to Addie. A creative seamstress, Addie used the material to make a new dress for each of her two daughters.

In 1910, W.J. took a position as Superintendent of Aids to Navigation in Northeastern North Carolina at Long Point station. His duties included inspecting the light at Currituck Beach. Captain Nathan Swain was the principal keeper there at the time, and he worked with two brothers, Wesley and Riley Austin. The Currituck Beach compound ran smoothly, and Tate’s inspections were little more than mere formalities. In fact, W.J. and Nathan were fast friends, and the inspection was a time for the two comrades to visit, providing a welcome break in the monotony of the lighthouse business. During this time, Nathan and his wife were taking care of their young granddaughter, Marie Dozier. Marie’s father had contracted a deadly case of typhoid fever on the family farm across the sound. After his death, Marie’s mother was forced to leave Currituck County to attend business school in Norfolk because she could not support Marie at home. Marie was essentially denied a parent first by disease, then again by bad economic conditions — both were particularly vexing problems in the South at this time. W.J., who knew all too well how difficult it was for a child to lose his or her parents, was especially tender with little Marie, going out of his way to offer her a kind word.

In 1928, the station at Long Point was closed and W.J. was transferred to the station at Coinjock. In the mid- to late 1930s, William (Bill) D. Lindsay, who was a close family friend of the Tate’s, was hired by the Bureau of Lighthouses to assist W.J. with maintaining the aids to navigation between North
Landing River to the Albemarle Sound. By this time, the keepers had vacated the Currituck Beach compound, and the old lighthouse was operated by four bulbs and a series of 90 batteries located at the base of the lighthouse. One of Bill’s jobs was to take a small motor boat across the sound to the compound then clean and charge the batteries for eight hours. He remembers that in the late 1930s near the ocean at Corolla “there wasn’t anybody up and down that beach for 50 miles. In those days, there was just nothing on that beach.” When asked what on earth he did to pass the time at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse while the batteries were charging, Bill replied:

Went to visit. They had a little store up at Corolla at that time. Mr. Johnny Austin ran the store. You probably had half a dozen Coca Colas. And few items there [laughter]. I’d go up to visit him [Johnny Austin] for a while, while the batteries were charging. They had a room there [in the lighthouse] that had enough rags to clean that place up for a hundred years. I had them all spread out nice on that bench, and that was a nice place to sleep [laughter]. I had to stay there eight hours, and remember it took an hour to get across the sound and an hour to get back, so that was a 10-hour day. I saw no need wasting all that time. So I did a little bit of sleeping [laughter].

This was, of course, during the Great Depression. After being asked if the Depression changed life in Currituck County, he had this to say:

We didn’t know any different. So how could you think it could change? It couldn’t change. You were brought up living — the way I was brought up — living on a farm. You lived on that farm, and the farm supplied your needs. And you followed the old mule. You looked at the south end of a northbound mule [laughter] from the time you were that high. You fed the hogs, you fed the chickens, you went swimming, you shot ducks and shot whatever you could shoot, and you ate whatever you had.

We thought it was fine. We didn’t know any difference. We didn’t think there was any Depression. It didn’t hurt me.

He also remembers that the people in Currituck County suffered a chronic shortage of cash. “We didn’t have any money,” he recalled. “The people that hired farm help [paid] one dollar a day, and anybody that wasn’t a grown man got much less, down to 25 cents a day, for working in the fields, so you can understand the day I graduated [high school] I left here.” Bill’s job with the Bureau of Lighthouses was never secure. He explained that during the Depression you might be lucky enough to get a job with the government one day “and if they decided to lay you off, they laid you off this week and hired you back a short while afterwards if they needed you. In other words, you worked for the government when they needed you — not when you needed the job.” When the Bureau of Lighthouses was dissolved in 1930 and taken over by the Coast Guard, Bill said no thanks to the Coast Guard. He left economically depressed Currituck County, seeking his fortune elsewhere. Around that time, W.J. Tate retired after serving with the Bureau of Lighthouses for 29 years, the entire time it was in existence. He was surely one of a very
few people who did that. Not even George R. Putnam, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Lighthouses for 25 years, could make such a claim. W.J.'s memory continues to live in his great grandson, Corey:

He was a unique individual, to say the least. He was very well read. He was considered to be very extremely well-educated for this area. He had a photographic memory. If he ever saw anything once he would remember it. One of his favorite things was he used to quote poetry. All the time some people around here thought he was nuts [laughter]. He was very much interested in the operation of mechanical things and how things operated. He was probably one of the earliest advocates of science in schools around here. In fact, he used to petition the school board to include more science and mathematical-type schooling in the school system. Of course he was an early advocate of the airplane because he was there at the birth of aviation when the Wrights did their experiments at Kitty Hawk. He was a great athlete. My grandfather [Tate's son, Elijah Tate] used to say he [W.J. Tate] could run down the beach — and this was in sand now — and could jump up and could click his heels three times before he hit ground. I've heard people say that even when he got to be 70 and 80 years old, he would take off in a sprint across the yard and jump over a five-rail fence! He was very spry. He was not a very tall man, but he was very thin and very athletic. I remember my grandfather saying that he challenged a man on the beach to a foot race one time. He [Tate] bet him that he could beat him running backwards, and he did.

In many ways, Bill, W.J. and Addie personify our romantic, nostalgic notions of the Outer Banks. Bill remembers a time, not so long ago, when a person could walk for hours on the beach without seeing another soul. The lives of W.J. and Addie were characterized by tempests, sunken ships, lighthouses and the first human flight. They lived with both feet firmly planted on the ground yet believed it was possible to soar with the birds. They freely gave shelter, encouragement and support to the Wright brothers.

W.J. used his association with the Wrights to enhance his public service, working to make life better for people on the Outer Banks. Addie, on the other hand, used the Wrights' discarded glider coverings to make two dresses, making it possible for us to contemplate a time when two young women on the Outer Banks wore gowns fashioned from the wings of a dream.

2. ibid.
3. ibid.
4. ibid.
9. ibid.
10. ibid.
11. ibid.
A close view of the Fresnel lens.
Lloyd Vernon Gaskill
Bertha Davis Gaskill
Served 1940-1948

John Gaskill, Dorothy Gaskill Sullivan and Erlene Gaskill White are the three surviving children of light keeper Lloyd Vernon Gaskill and his wife, Bertha Davis Gaskill. Their oldest son, Vernon Gaskill, Jr., died in 1950. John Gaskill was born in 1916 in Wanchese, North Carolina, and after more than 22 years of service in the United States Navy, retired to his childhood home. Dorothy was born in 1919 also in Wanchese, North Carolina, and currently resides in Cayce, South Carolina. Erlene was born in 1929 in Wanchese and currently resides in Norfolk, Virginia. Erlene maintains a summer home in Wanchese next door to her brother, and Dorothy comes there often to visit.

Lloyd Vernon Gaskill (everybody in Wanchese called him Vernon) and Bertha Lee Davis had plans to get married, but then the notice arrived in the mail: The United States Bureau of Lighthouses had given Vernon an appointment to his first lighthouse, and he needed to report right away to Hilton Head, South Carolina. Lighthouse jobs were coveted, and a call to duty pre-empted almost any plans, even a wedding date. Vernon and Bertha returned their marriage license to the clerk of court's office. One spring day in 1912, after Vernon got settled in his new post, Bertha boarded a train, leaving behind her childhood home and rushing to the arms of her beloved. They were wed in Beaufort, near Hilton Head, and over the course of their marriage, Vernon and Bertha reared four children and lived through two world wars and a worldwide economic depression. Vernon served a full career with the U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses, and after 28 years, he made a transition from the Bureau to the United States Coast Guard. Over the years, Vernon witnessed the technological advancements that ultimately ended the era of light keepers. When he started, keepers had to haul kerosene to the top of the lighthouse, trim and ignite the wick then stand watch over the flame all night. By the end of Vernon's career, electric light bulbs had replaced wicks, and the old, smoky, living flame of the lighthouse had been forever extinguished.

Vernon worked various lighthouses
from Hilton Head, South Carolina, to the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. But most of his light keeping career was spent at Bodie Island Lighthouse in North Carolina. John Gaskill and Dorothy Sullivan, Vernon and Bertha's oldest surviving children, and Vernon, Jr., the first born son (now deceased), grew up in Wanchese while their father was light keeper at Bodie Island. John and Vernon Jr. often helped their father with the light. John remembers climbing the lighthouse early in the morning and, after shutting off the fuel to the wick, he and his dog, Chess, would go out on the landing:

Chess would do about anything possible to be with me. We would watch ships [from the top of the lighthouse] and he would lay right there and sleep while I looked through the telescope. He was a good dog. He did not like going into the watch room because it smelled of kerosene and alcohol. When I would get through [with the light], he would be out on the balcony. It was nice in the morning up there — real nice.³

Erline White, the youngest child, however, did not like spending time at Bodie Island. By the time she was 8 years old, her older siblings were grown and gone. Erline, left at home with no playmates, had this to say about life at Bodie Island:

It was horrible, lonely. If I had not been a reader, I do not know what I would have done. I was the happiest person in the world when the public library opened in Manteo and we could go on our lunch hour from school to the library. I would load up on books and read all the time.³

Vernon Gaskill with two of his children, probably Vernon Jr. and Dorothy.

But all that changed when the U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses was dissolved and all the coastal aids to navigation were put under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Coast Guard. Vernon became a commanding officer in the Coast Guard and moved to the Coinjock station to take the place of W.J. Tate who was ready to retire. He also assumed the duties of keeper for the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. It was 1940, the year France fell to Nazi Germany, Winston Churchill became Britain's prime minister and Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to an unprecedented third presidential term. Americans were debating their role in the European war. Internationalists wanted to provide aid to Britain, and isolationists thought Europe should be left to deal with its own problems. A little more than a year later, Japan launched a bold attack on Pearl Harbor, sinking or crippling 19 ships, demolishing about 150 planes and killing more than 2,400 servicemen and civilians. The Japanese assault ended all discussion on whether America should get involved in the war. In one day, the United States went from a country isolated from the war by the sheer expanse of two oceans to a country under attack. The war galvanized the country, affecting every person in America, including the Currituck Beach Lighthouse keeper and
his family at the Coinjock Coast Guard Station.

The Gaskill family was heavily involved in the war effort. John, who had spent his childhood watching ships “come up on the horizon and go off the other way” pursued his childhood dream of going to sea and joined the Navy in 1934. Early in the war, his ship was operating near Russia, in the chilly waters of the Barents Sea. In 1942, he was in the Pacific where he stayed for the remainder of the war. Vernon Jr. was troubled by a hearing disability that prevented him from joining the armed services. He was turned away from every branch of the military he applied to, and he tried them all, before finally getting a civil service job on a tug boat hauling oil supply barges in the Pacific. It was dangerous work. One Japanese bomb would have turned the barge into an inferno on the water. Vernon Jr. was determined to serve in the Pacific where he knew his little brother was fighting. Everyday he looked for John's ship, hoping to see it break the horizon.

Dorothy remembers Vernon Jr. saying he believed he saw every ship in the Pacific fleet except John's ship.

Meanwhile, at the Coinjock station, Vernon tended the aids to navigation for the Intracoastal Waterway, performed rescue operations and supervised the enlisted boys stationed there. By this time, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse was operated by a series of batteries and electric bulbs. The last resident keepers, Homer Austin, James Cox and George Johnson, had long since moved out of the compound housing. Yet, the old lighthouse still needed some human attention, so Vernon traveled to Currituck Beach once a week to charge the batteries. Automating lighthouses meant that light keepers had to look for other work, retire or change their relationship with the lighthouse. Rather than being the axis around which life rotated, lighthouses became simply one of a number of aids to navigation that needed tending. Many of them were like the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, which only needed about eight hours of attention a week. This meant, of course, that keepers and their families such as the Gaskills were no longer socially isolated living in the shadow of the lighthouse. At the Coinjock station, the war effort converged with lighthouse automation and brought a plethora of new faces to the area. The Coinjock station was a frequent stopover for military forces in transit. Dorothy remembers the night she served coffee to one particular officer who would later become the stuff of legends:

I had gone up to bed and mother was [already] in bed when Daddy called me. [A PT boat had arrived] and the officers wanted to know where they could get some coffee. Well of course it [Coinjock] was just a little wide place in the road. There was not any place [to get coffee] there — just some general stores. So he [Daddy] called me and asked me if I would make some coffee for them. And believe it or not, John Kennedy was one of them. I served coffee to John Kennedy. Of course I didn't know him from Adam's house cat at the time. But later on, when he was running for president, Daddy was talking to me about it. He said, 'You don't remember him?' I said, 'No. I know I was undressing for bed and you called me downstairs and I made the coffee.' They [the officers] were seated all around the table. I don't know how many of them there were, five or six. I know they were all from the New England area. I didn't pay too much attention to them, except
that I knew they were from New England from their accent. They were very nice, and later on Daddy said, ‘You don’t remember him?’ I said, ‘Daddy I don’t remember the face, all I know is they wanted coffee. I gave them coffee. They left. I went to bed [laughter].’

During the war, four enlisted Coast Guard men were stationed at Coinjock and lived in the same house with the Gaskill family. The den was transformed into a radio room, and the dining room became sleeping barracks for “the boys.” Dorothy, who along with daughter Marybrace, joined her family at the Coinjock station, remembers the war years well. “It was a little strange,” she recalled, “living in the house with the Coast Guard. [Yet] it was kind of fun, you know? I remember one girl said something to me one day in Coinjock. She said, ‘My, I bet you have a date every night.’ I said, ‘A date — with somebody you see the first thing you get up in the morning?’” Erline remembers that the time at Coinjock was an exciting change from Bodie Island. “There was always something going on there.” She remembered, “It was so much fun I couldn’t wait to get home from school.”

To avoid German submarines off the Outer Banks, ships used the safer waters of the Intracoastal Waterway. The Coinjock Coast Guard base was located on the canal that connected the Currituck Sound with the Albemarle Sound and provided a safe shipping avenue. Dorothy remembers during the war, that “the submarines off the coast were so bad that anything that could get through the inland waterway did. All the Coast Guard cutters came through there, and they would tie up at our dock for the night and then go on the next day.” She would watch the boats pass by and often was amazed at the size of the ships that squeezed through the canal. “Some of those ships were so big,” she recalled, “they had to empty their tanks to bring up their propellers to get through.”

Like a lighthouse, the job of tending the Coinjock station was 24 hours a day and seven days a week. At any moment, a Coast Guard cutter could radio in and request permission to dock at the station. Vernon would meet the ship at the dock and try to assist the captain with whatever he might need. Vernon and his family also never knew when a distress call might come in. The Army and Navy pilots used the Currituck Sound for a bombing practice range. Occasionally something would go wrong and a plane would go down. When that happened, Vernon’s crew was usually the first to arrive on the crash scene. Dorothy remembers when her father brought home one
particular young pilot whose plane had caught fire and crashed. She cleaned and bandaged a severe burn on his hand. But, there were not always survivors. One night around midnight, Dorothy came home from a date to find “the whole house blazing with light and the Coast Guard truck sitting out there in the yard. I said “What is going on?” And they had two dead bodies in the back of the truck. Of course they took them on to Norfolk.” On another occasion, Vernon arrived on a crash scene in the Currituck Sound and discovered a plane buried in the mud so deep, just the tail was sticking out.\(^5\)

After the war, Vernon retired from the Coast Guard, and he and Bertha returned to their home in Wanchese. They had successfully raised a family of four children, tended numerous lighthouses and done their part in the WWII effort. Yet, retirement did not mean Vernon intended to rest on his laurels. After Bertha died in 1965, Vernon fought off the loneliness by opening up his house as a tourist home. Over the years, he developed a small following of loyal customers who returned every season to stay with the old skipper in Wanchese. Erline, who had married and was living in Norfolk, came home on the weekends to help her father with the business. She recalled those days: “He loved it. Oh, he loved it. He met some wonderful people. Daddy was a people person. He really was. And everybody liked him.” It would be difficult to find out just who stayed with Vernon because he did not keep a guest book. Erline remembers her father had a very good reason for that:

He started with one [a guest book] but an unmarried couple came in one night and signed it. That was the end of the guest book. He chased them off. They signed different names. You did not do that in Wanchese, not in my daddy’s day and time. Daddy still would not do it if he was still living today. He had not been keeping it [the guest book] very long. He did not want any more guest book after that. If they were not married, he did not want to know it [laughter].\(^{11}\)

Vernon and Bertha Gaskill lived to see the day when the traditional light keeper’s way of life passed into obscurity, but they were not passive witnesses. When lighthouses were automated, Vernon cast off the mantle of light keeper and took up the role of Coast Guard skipper. While America was at war and German submarines cruised just a few miles away in the Atlantic, Vernon commanded the Coinjock Coast Guard station and maintained an important link in the Intracoastal Waterway. In the post war years, as crowds of tourists descended upon the Outer Banks, Vernon capitalized on the influx of business by hosting overnight guests in his home, a house, incidentally, that was partially built from old shipwreck lumber Vernon salvaged from the beach.\(^{12}\) You could say that house is a metaphor for Vernon and Bertha’s life: a bit of the old built into the foundation of the new. Vernon and Bertha recast their roles with the changing times while carrying forth some of the old traditions such as devotion to family and a sense of duty.

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8. ibid.
9. ibid.
10. ibid.
The keepers' house in 1979.
In 1964, the Coast Guard hired Gene Austin to take care of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. By this time, no one had been living in the keepers' quarters for more than two decades, but the light continued to operate for the benefit of small ocean and sound vessels. Twice a month, Gene would charge the batteries then climb the tower to clean the lens and change the bulbs. Shirley would go with Gene every once and a while and help him clean out the lighthouse. One time she and Gene swept all 214 steps inside the lighthouse, literally cleaning it from top to bottom. It was so dusty they had to wear respirators to breathe. Gene's starting pay was around $25 a month. Although he received periodic pay increases, at one point his salary was not even enough to cover his monthly contribution for hospitalization insurance. In fact, in order to keep insurance, Gene and Shirley had to kick in about four dollars a month. So, pecuniary incentives do not explain why, for 25 years after the compound was deserted, Gene, and by extension Shirley, took responsibility for the lighthouse. Gene, who is unpretentious and rather quiet, will tell you he tended the light simply to help out the Coast Guard. In the mid-1960s, there was no hard surface road between Currituck Beach and anywhere else. The only way to get to the compound was by four-wheel drive on the beach or by boat across Currituck Sound. When Gene took over lighthouse operations, he spared the Coast Guard from making a trip to Currituck twice a month. There were, however, more profound reasons why Gene and Shirley took on the light. The explanation lies in the past.

Gene's roots sprang from sandy soils. His progenitors were fishermen, sailors and lighthouse keepers on the Outer Banks. Gene's maternal great grandfather was a Lewark from Penny's Hill, a small fishing village about four miles north of Currituck Beach Lighthouse. His grandmother, Lillie Lewark, was also from Penny's Hill. The
Lewark family lived in virtual isolation from the rest of the world on a barren and often inhospitable landscape. In the mid-1800s on the Outer Banks, a man not fortunate enough to have a government job with the Lighthouse Board or Life Saving Service had to survive on natural resources, often just above subsistence level. Eking a living from the barrier islands required deftness in hunting and fishing, skills usually taught to young boys, while girls learned how to cook, clean, sew and garden. The Lewarks were a large family, with quite a few mouths to feed, and their ability to make a living fishing the Atlantic waters and hunting waterfowl in the Currituck Sound testifies to their fortitude and courage. Fishing could be especially dangerous. While most days passed uneventfully, occasionally offshore storms blew up without warning. When that happened, ocean swells and winds were a lethal combination, sometimes swamping small boats and casting fishermen into strong currents. Storms aside, fishermen departed home everyday for a watery wilderness. The Currituck Beach Lighthouse, after it was finally completed in 1875, must have been a welcome landmark for fishermen like the Lewarks who made a living upon the rolling seascape.

Thomas Austin was Gene's paternal great grandfather. Thomas was one of those lucky 19th-century sailors who lived to tell about the day his ship foundered off the Hatteras coast. According to the family legend, Thomas was the first Austin to arrive on the Outer Banks, and he is responsible for establishing the Austin family there. Two of Thomas' boys, sons of a shipwrecked sailor, were Wesley and Riley Austin, and they grew up to become light keepers at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Wesley was Gene's great uncle, and Riley was Gene's grandfather. Gene's father, and then later Gene himself, joined the Coast Guard, thereby continuing the family tradition of working on the ocean.

The poetry of this family history surely was not lost on Gene. His great grandfathers had been seafarers who depended upon lighthouses. Then, in the wink of a generation, his grandfathers and fathers became the keepers and Coast Guardsmen who were the stewards of the sea. So, in the mid-1960s, when the Coast Guard was casting about for someone to take care of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, it probably seemed a natural thing for Gene to volunteer for the job.

Shirley's history in Currituck County also reaches back several generations. While her paternal family tree is rooted in the farm country of Tennessee, her maternal lineage is anchored in the offshore waters of Currituck County. Solomon Beasley and Cema O'Neal Beasley, a fisherman and fisherman's wife, were Shirley's maternal great grandparents. In the mid to late 1800s, they lived in Seagull, a small fishing village located near Penny's Hill. Time and the barrier island's natural littoral drift collapsed the village, and it has long since folded into ocean's waves. Before it disappeared, Seagull was also home to Shirley's maternal grandparents, John Whitson and Mary Amelia Beasley Whitson. Mary (Solomon's and Cema's daughter) was born on the Outer Banks in the summer of 1888. Her husband, John, was from Blackwater, Virginia, but he adapted to the North Carolina coastal lifestyle, making a living fishing and guiding hunting trips.

Shirley does not remember her great grandparents, Solomon and Cema, but she spent a lot of time with grandparents, Mary and John, whom she loved dearly. Mary was attentive to little Shirley, making puddings and other sweet treats for her. John taught Shirley to appreciate Currituck County's maritime environment. In Currituck County, as with most southern rural areas, labor for white workers was divided along gender lines. Although there were exceptions, for the most part women did not accompany their husbands on fishing expeditions. It was the men,
therefore, who closely studied the sky for weather changes. This is not to say, of course, that women did not know how to watch the sky or were unconcerned with the climate. After all, the lives of their husbands, brothers and sons often depended upon good weather. Yet, generally speaking, men had the greatest stake in the weather and paid very close attention to the cosmos. “One thing my grandfather did,” Shirley recalled, “was to go out in the evening on the porch to see what the weather was going to be like the next day.” A sun dog, which was a smaller sun beside the real sun, meant the weather was going to take a turn for the worse. A ring around the moon at night also forebode bad weather, and the number of stars in the ring indicated how many days the inclement weather would last. A rainbow, lovely as it might be, was bad news if it marked the sky at dawn. “Rainbow at morning,” recalled Shirley, “meant sailors take warning.”

Shirley grew up in the days before weather satellites and electronic navigation aids. The accumulated wisdom of the preceding generations informed her that the coastal environment was sometimes unpredictable and always to be respected. In this context, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse took on heightened meaning. No matter how the sky changed, the lighthouse was a permanent fixture on the horizon. It was solidity in the midst of impermanence. Shirley remembers being on the water with her grandfather and watching him using the lighthouse to guide them home. After she grew up and married Gene, they relied on the lighthouse many times to mark the path across Currituck Sound. Things changed over time on the barrier islands. Seagull, the home of Shirley’s ancestors, has been erased from all but memory. Yet, the lighthouse has remained, a steady and important feature of her life.

The Currituck Beach Lighthouse is an imposing presence. It rises 132 feet in the air and took about one million bricks to build. The top of the tower is visible from almost anywhere in Corolla. Unlike the tower’s physical reality, the light is subtle; its rhythmic flash is a powerful force on the psyche. More noticeably regular than a heartbeat or breathing or ocean waves, the lighthouse beam has worked its way into the subconscious of the village residents, including Gene and Shirley. When asked if he ever worried that the light would go out without his noticing it, Gene replied, “When it went out, seemed like you knew it. I’d think just about anybody in the area would know it.” Other light keepers have expressed the same sentiment. Roy Gluckie, a light keeper’s son on Sambro Island in Nova Scotia, recalled that his father became so accustomed to the light that if it skipped a beat or went out, he caught it immediately. If Roy’s father happened to be asleep, the mere absence of the flash was enough to wake him instantly. Perhaps, then, in addition to the light’s physical presence and historical value, the regularity of the lighthouse is important to people who live in its shadow. Gene and Shirley, who grew up with the Currituck Beach Lighthouse practically in their backyard, were committed to its years after the site was abandoned. If the lighthouse is the brick and mortar of Currituck, then people like Gene and Shirley are its blood and bones.

1. Shirley Austin, interview with author, 14 July 1999, tape recording, Corolla, North Carolina
2. Hayman, Philip Ray. I Remember. (Unpublished manuscript; Currituck County, no date.) Philip was born in 1905 in Corolla, North Carolina. This is his unpublished autobiography containing remembrances of his childhood in Corolla. He does not give Lawick’s first name in the autobiography.
4. Although they certainly worked hard at home, women were usually dependant upon men for their livelihood. Women who lived independently as fishermen, hunters or even lighthouse keepers were practically unheard of on North Carolina’s beaches. There were, of course, exceptions. Recall that
Mildred Austin Gray went fishing when she was 10 years old or so, the age when many girls were sequestered indoors. Mildred's father, light keeper Homer Austin, even fixed up a small boat for her to use in Currituck Sound. But, Mildred's fishing remained more a leisure activity than training for an adult livelihood. Also, she was a tomboy during the late 1920s and early 1930s when it had become much more acceptable for girls to cross socially constructed gender lines. In the 1920s, after all, it became fashionable for women to have a slim, boy-like figure and sport a page boy haircut.

Norris Austin, interview with author, 10 June 1990, tape recording, Corolla, North Carolina.

Debbie Westner accepts the key to the lighthouse from the Coast Guard in preparation for opening to the public in the summer of 1990.
Lloyd Childers
Served 1997-present

Lloyd Childers was born in Montclair, New Jersey, and is currently the Executive Director and Light Keeper of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. She resides in Corolla, North Carolina. William (Billy) Parker grew up on a farm near Raleigh, North Carolina, and currently resides in Manteo, North Carolina. He is a founding member of the Outer Banks Conservationists, a North Carolina nonprofit corporation officially created on January 30, 1980. John Wilson is the registered agent and also a founding member of OBC. He grew up in Manteo, North Carolina, and lives there today. He is the great grandson of Homer and Orphia Austin, keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from 1928 to 1936.

Corey Tate, a lifelong resident of Currituck County, recently talked about a particular summer day in the mid-1970s when he and his family packed a picnic lunch and took a boat across Currituck Sound to spend the day at Corolla and have a look at the old lighthouse. “As we pulled up into the boat basin at the Whalehead Club,” he recalled, “there was a snake climbing up the bulk head there. I know that snake must have been six feet long. It was the biggest snake I have ever seen in my life!” When he got to the lighthouse compound he found that “the keepers’ house was completely covered. You could see the roof of it but that was it. And the grounds were just overgrown. I mean there was a little clear spot around the base of the lighthouse and that was it. Prickly pears everywhere.” Corey and his family were looking at the results of about 25 years of indifference. Beginning in the 1940s, the houses and most of the grounds of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse slid into a period of decline and neglect. After the keepers vacated the houses, no one was left to beat back the insistent vines and cacti, no gardeners to tend flower beds and vegetable plots, no children to trim grass in the sidewalks with pocket knives. Yet, even as Corey made his way through the prickly pears and snakes that day, events had been set in motion that would culminate in a radical transformation of the Currituck Beach
Lighthouse.

In the summer of 1969, the seeds of change were sown that would eventually resurrect the Currituck Beach compound. It was the final summer of a heady and turbulent decade during which young people questioned the status quo, shattering the post-World War II mood of consensus. In June, New York police raided the Stonewall Inn sparking a two-day riot, and in August more than 400,000 young people descended on Bethel, New York, for the Woodstock concert. It was also the summer that 17-year-old John Wilson, Homer and Orphia Austin's great grandson, first laid eyes on the Currituck Beach compound. John was working a summer internship with the U.S. Park Service along the beaches of the Outer Banks. One day, on a whim, he and some fellow workers decided to take their four-wheeler up to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. John had heard stories about the lighthouse from his mother, Estelle Wilson, and grandmother, Sibyl, both of whom at one time lived at the lighthouse with Homer and Orphia. What he saw that day was old, dilapidated building choked with weeds and vines. Although John was too young to do anything about it at the time, the memory of his grandparents' abandoned home stayed with him over the years as he finished high school, graduated from college and began graduate studies in Washington, D.C. While he was in graduate school, John learned of a presidential executive order mandating that structures on the historical register be protected and stabilized. He went to the Library of Congress, looked up the North Carolina buildings listed on the national register and found the Currituck Beach Lighthouse there. More research revealed that the Fish and Wildlife Commission controlled the lighthouse compound, so John started writing letters to the Commission, in his words, reminding them that they had an obligation to protect the house. Billy Parker, whom John had met at college, also took an interest in the lighthouse and started going with John to the Commission meetings to agitate for preservation of the keepers' house.

Meanwhile, John went to the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources where he was referred to Lloyd Childers in the State Historic Preservation Office. Lloyd's path to that office had been a crooked one. She was born in New Jersey and lived in Virginia, Maryland, Ohio and North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, married and reared two children, and worked in various positions from census taker to library administrator. She was not a beach brat, in other words someone who grew up on the seashore, but she had spent some time on the coast in the mid-1940s when she was 9 or 10 years old. Her grandparents had retired to Gibson Island in the Chesapeake Bay. While her father was busy in military training, Lloyd and her brother lived with their grandparents on the island for about a year. It was perhaps
the most wonderful year of her childhood. She recalled “that is where I think my beginnings of interest in maritime life came from.” In the waters of the bay, Lloyd learned to swim, fish and sail. Gibson Island was small and the community was tightly knit, so Lloyd was free to roam at large exploring the natural world around her. She remembers that it was there she “learned the wonderful joy of being in a maritime area with wildlife and water and [the] freedom to be myself.”

Although Lloyd would grow up to spend many years inland, the salt water of the Chesapeake Bay was never flushed from her veins. Many years later, when John walked into her office, those childhood memories came flooding back to her. Lloyd describes their first meeting like this:

Just a few weeks after I went with the State Historic Preservation Office, a young man came to my office. I was six weeks [into the job and] I didn’t really know what I was doing. He showed me this picture of this old broken-down building and he said, ‘I’m John Wilson from Manteo. I’m an architect there, and this is a picture of the keepers’ house at Corolla.’ Well, I’d never heard of Corolla. He said, ‘It’s on the Outer Banks. I would like to lease this building from the state and restore it.’ I said, ‘You would?’ I mean, the place was a wreck. I was sort of flabbergasted, and I don’t even know how he happened to come to me. I was probably the only one available [in the office]. I said, ‘Well, why would you want to do that?’ He said, ‘My great grandfather was one of the keepers of the lighthouse. That’s where he lived, and so I want to form a nonprofit group. I’ll raise the money privately to restore it. The State [of North Carolina] will be the beneficiary because it will still be a state building and all the money we put into it [will eventually go to the state]. In fact some day maybe we’ll just give it back to the state and cancel the lease. But, I need a lease that is long enough term so that we can get the job done. So what do you think?’ Well, when I heard that it was his great grandfather, I started thinking about my grandfather and about Gibson Island and about the water and what your grandfathers do for you, you know? I was sort of captured by this young man and his dream of taking this wreck of a building and bringing it back to life.

After about two years of red tape, negotiations and property transfers from one governmental agency to another, the Currituck Beach compound was leased to the Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc., a nonprofit entity inspired by the dream of preserving the keepers’ quarters and grounds. The
founding members were Billy Parker, John Wilson and three of their close friends, Anne Bahr, Meille Rockefeller and Lee Salet.\textsuperscript{10}

Getting the lease, however, was just the beginning. The keepers’ house was basically sound but the years had taken their toll on the structure as well as the landscape. Lloyd remembers her first visit to the compound and seeing the keepers’ house:

I had seen a bunch of wrecks of houses, and I knew there were some wonderful stories about bringing them back to life again, but this one was in terrible, terrible shape. All of the doors and windows were out, the porches were falling off, the cistern was in shambles and the whole place was terribly overgrown. In fact, the north end of the house was just entwined with vegetation. The thing I remember most vividly was going up the second floor of the north end of the house, looking in the fire place and seeing a great big huge black snake sticking its head out. I mean, I can still remember the clutch in my throat that I felt when I saw that huge black snake — on the second floor. It was a this big around! It was just incredible. Later John told me that when the guys were clearing, they did kill a huge, huge black snake. It probably wasn’t very harmful. But to me any snake . . . I don’t care . . . I have a hard time with worms [laughter]. The other thing I remember about it [the visit to the compound] was I got a horrendous case of chiggers from being at this place. My legs were totally red with chigger bites, totally red. For weeks afterwards, I was dying from this stuff [the chigger bites]. Those are the two highlights. I don’t really remember too much about the house except that it was an old-broken down thing. But John seemed to be very interested and anxious to do something about it. I thought, well, good luck [laughter].\textsuperscript{11}

John, Billy and their friends, Anne, Lee and Meille, all of whom were baby boomers and came of age during a decade of social revolution, set about preserving one small patch of the Outer Banks. They began the hard work of cleaning up the compound. John remembers they cleared the grounds “by hand. Every inch of it by hand. We didn’t want to hurt the trees . . . and yet they were covered with briars. So, every inch of it had to be done by hand. We clipped and pulled, clipped and pulled and mowed and clipped and pulled until, finally, it was opened up.”\textsuperscript{12}

The foliage was incredibly dense, forming a mantle of vegetation that hid the nearby small keeper’s house completely from view. Billy remembers the small house emerged slowly, over a period of months, as the briars, vines and other overgrowth were peeled back layer by layer.\textsuperscript{13}

It took about a decade to get the double keepers’ house and grounds to the shape they are in today. In 1990, OBC leased the lighthouse from the Coast Guard and started charging a fee to climb to the top of the tower in order to raise money for restoration and provide services to sightseers. Debbie Westner, a Corolla resident, was employed by OBC to accomplish much of the work during this time. Since the hands-on work of restoration was nearly finished and more people were visiting the compound, OBC decided it was time to find someone with a background in historic sites to run the compound, and they offered the job to Lloyd. When the call came in, Lloyd remembers she “almost dropped the phone. I mean, I really did. I had no clue.”\textsuperscript{14} There were, of course, details to work out such as early retirement from the
The double keepers’ quarters prior to renovations that began in 1980 and as it appears today.

state, finding a place to live and so on. But, all those things came together. In late 1997, Lloyd took up residence within a few miles of the lighthouse and began work at the compound supervising staff, monitoring restoration work, fielding phone calls, answering visitors’ questions and handling all the business that comes along with a popular historic site. Lloyd, of course, was aware of how important the light had been historically to mariners off the coast of Currituck Beach, and still is to many small vessels. Her appreciation of the light was deepened when one night the darkness caught her unawares. Lloyd remembered that, not long after coming to work at the compound, she:

... had worked too late and it was dark. I went out of my office and there was no light. I saw for the first time total darkness. I mean it was absolutely black. I had to walk with my hands out, and I still ran into a tree [laughter]. And then, here came the light. Every 20 seconds, you know, the light goes on for three seconds. It was like an unreal thing, like getting a glimpse into heaven or something. This light was there. [I] could see where the trees were, and [I] could see where [I] was. There is something very special about that... when you project that and think about the mariners that were out there wondering where they were, in the darkness of the sea where you know there is no light. They looked out in that darkness, and they suddenly see that little beam of light. I mean, that had got to be a terrific thing. A beacon of hope.¹⁵

For Lloyd, the lighthouse has remained a symbolic guidepost to those youthful, high-spirited days she spent on the Chesapeake Bay. Psychologists have argued that, throughout childhood, we create mental blueprints that become reference points for the rest of our lives. We grow up and pick mates because they are or are not like our parents. We teach our children the games we played, read them the books we read. All it takes to remind us of our past is a whiff of a certain smell, the rush of a specific physical sensation or the glimpse of a particular landscape. No matter how far we roam as adults, we carry maps of memory that will take us home again and again in the realm of imagination. By the end of the 1990s, Lloyd had wandered far and wide from her grandparents’ home and her childhood adventures on the Chesapeake Bay. Yet, the experience of living near the water remained with her, becoming part of who she is, influencing how she thought about things. As the years passed and the girl became a woman, she carried in her memory a map home to the
seashore. Here, she would occasionally remember, here was a place of freedom. When John showed up in her office that day bearing a photograph of an old, forgotten building and telling her it was a link to his history on the edge of the sea, something inside whispered to Lloyd. In a sense, it was the beginning of a long journey, guided by a beacon of hope known as the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

2. Ibid.
3. Homer was a keeper at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from 1928 to 1936. Ophilia was his wife.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

Board of Directors of Outer Banks Conservationists in 1995. From the left is Billy Parker, Debbie Hill, Terry McDowell, Jane Preyer and John Wilson.
Dorothy: Suddenly, you know, people realized that here was something that was going to be gone one of these days.

Erline: And they compare our lighthouses to Europe’s castles.

Dorothy: Yeah.

Erline: That’s our big deal.

Dorothy: Suddenly everybody’s into lighthouses. People look at me like, “You were a lighthouse keepers daughter?” I say, “Yeah.” And they look at you like you’re . . . you’re either some sort of insect or you’re royalty or something.

A conversation between two daughters of a light keeper,
July 1999