

LOG

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CURRITUCK BEACH LIGHT STATION

By Cheryl-Shelton Roberts and Bruce Roberts

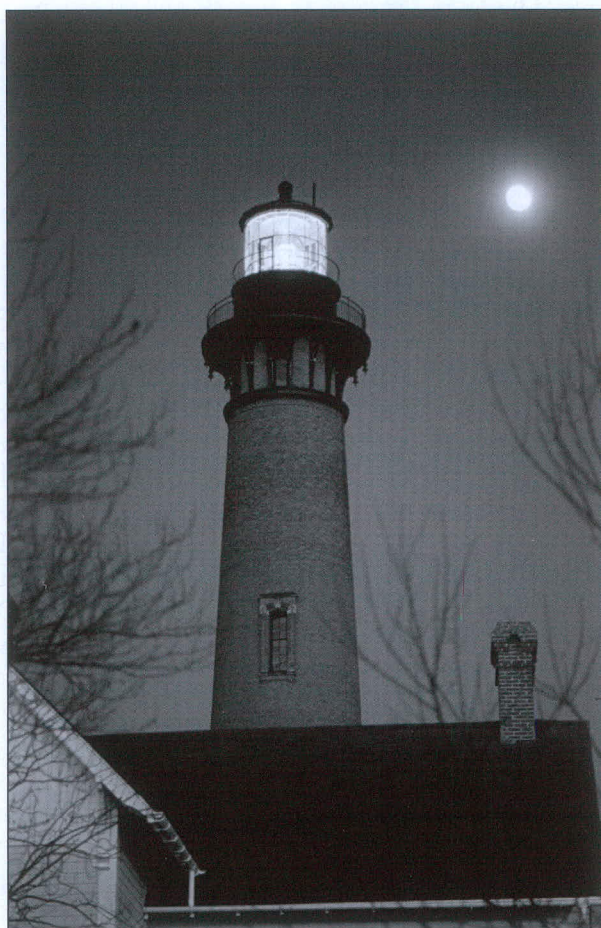
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This article is excerpted from the new book North Carolina Lighthouses, Stories of History and Hope by Cheryl Shelton-Roberts and Bruce Roberts. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. © 2012 Cheryl Shelton-Roberts.

he feeling of quietude within the Currituck Beach Lighthouse complex is quickened by undertones of excitement as visitors anticipate climbing *all the way up* the towering lighthouse's spiral stairs and taking in an unforgettable panoramic view. This historic northern Outer Banks site is steeped in history, architecture, romance, and mystery. Besides offering some of the best aerobics on the East Coast by climbing the tower, the Currituck Beach Light Station is part of an authentic living-history district. Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc., nonprofit permanent stewards of the light station, has recreated history with one of the most successful restorations in America. The 1875 light station has been returned to its glory days; furthermore, plans continue to secure the light station its deserved, protected place amidst modern resort development.

Nestled amidst these modern intrusions, this lighthouse takes a visitor back to a simpler time 135 years ago. This 19th century tower boasts outstanding brickwork, superior ironwork, and a lantern room that holds a beautiful first-order Fresnel lens, one of the few original lenses still operating in an American lighthouse. Transcending the present, the scene becomes that of a small fishing village where everyone lived in tune with nature, in which tides were the only clocks, and where every activity was in sync with the sea and weather.

Plans for American lighthouse construction came to an abrupt halt during the War



A rising winter's full moon adds warmth to a cold night in companionship with the Currituck Beach Lighthouse's first-order Fresnel lens and its 1,000-watt electric bulb.

Between the States. Following the war, the Lighthouse Service resumed its pre-war building plan for tall coastal towers along the shoal-studded barrier islands that had begun by completing Cape Lookout Lighthouse in 1859. War and economy delayed this lighthouse's construction until 1873.

The community had been formerly known by various names including Poyner's Hill, Jones Hill, and Whalehead; later, in 1895, the town officially became Corolla, meaning the petals of a flower, with the building of a post office. The name Currituck was derived from an Algonquin Indian term "Carotank," meaning "land of the wild geese." Most areas of the Outer Banks are on the American flyway where, before overhunting occurred, enormous flocks of geese once used the area as a migratory stopover for rest and feeding. The light assumed the name reference and became "Currituck Beach Lighthouse."

Swiftiness Requested

In 1873 there was a sense of congressional urgency to complete this lighthouse due to numerous wrecks on the shoals off Currituck Beach. A lighthouse there had been requested as early as 1854. In a letter from February 16, 1855, Henry-Lepaute, maker of Fresnel lenses in Paris, France, acknowledged an order for an illuminating apparatus for "Currituck" Lighthouse. In a second letter dated Sept 12, 1855, Henry-Lepaute stated that a "2nd order [Fresnel lens] to be shipped per 'Mountaineer'" and, in a subsequent letter that same day, sent an invoice for the lens. On April 4, 1856, Inspector Case at the Staten Island Lighthouse Depot, New York, recorded that the lens intended for Currituck would be forwarded to Key West, Florida. Additionally, construction plans had shifted to a replacement light at Bodie Island



The small structure to the right of the keepers' house is a cistern. Rain water was gathered from roof runoff and directed through pipes to a cistern on either side of the house to provide fresh water for keepers' families. This technique of water storage was standard for all American lighthouses until the mid-20th century.

that would hold a third-order lens. Since a light had always been considered a necessity at Bodie Island because it marked the point for southbound ships to turn seaward to avoid Diamond Shoals, a second tower was planned and built in 1858-59 to replace an earlier tower that simply sank into soft sand at a site long drowned by Oregon Inlet. This left plans for the Currituck Beach Lighthouse once again on the drawing board. Certainly the Lighthouse Board intended to go ahead with the new lighthouse at Currituck Beach, but the War Between the States held these building plans hostage; moreover, the new Bodie Island Lighthouse had become a fallen soldier when it was destroyed by Confederates in 1861. Currituck would once again have to wait to become a priority for construction.

New lighthouses were being planned at Bodie Island and Currituck Beach by 1870.

After debating specific sites, Congress decided in favor of rebuilding near the former Bodie Island location, and plans for a Currituck Beach tower were made for a site approximately 40 miles to the north.

Finally, in an intense move to build a light, Fifth District Engineer Peter C. Hains wrote two letters dated March and April 1873 requesting permission to advertise for and to complete proposals for the ironwork. These letters are just prior to and simultaneous with a letter asking for assistance from the U.S. District Attorney in investigating titles of owners of land for the proposed site. Hains was not waiting around for a clear deed before getting construction bids and materials lined up. He had already completed boring samples in the area to identify the type of soil that he would be encountering, and, therefore, what kind of foundation was needed. When one of the two tracts of land in consideration was approved July 30, 1873, Hains was already moving ahead with plans to get this tower reaching skyward and beaming seaward.

When construction of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse began, there must have been a flurry of activity that awakened the sleepy fishing village. Temporary quarters for workmen, a carpenter's shop, blacksmith's shop, and cement shed were created. A pier at Church Island in Currituck Sound was built for landing materials, and a tramway, or railway, was put in place to carry these materials to the site. A parade of men and machinery announced to the community that a lighthouse was finally arriving. On May 29, 1874, expressing his logical validation for building this lighthouse, Hains wrote Lighthouse Board members the names of ships that had wrecked in the vicinity over a 20-year period to bear wit-

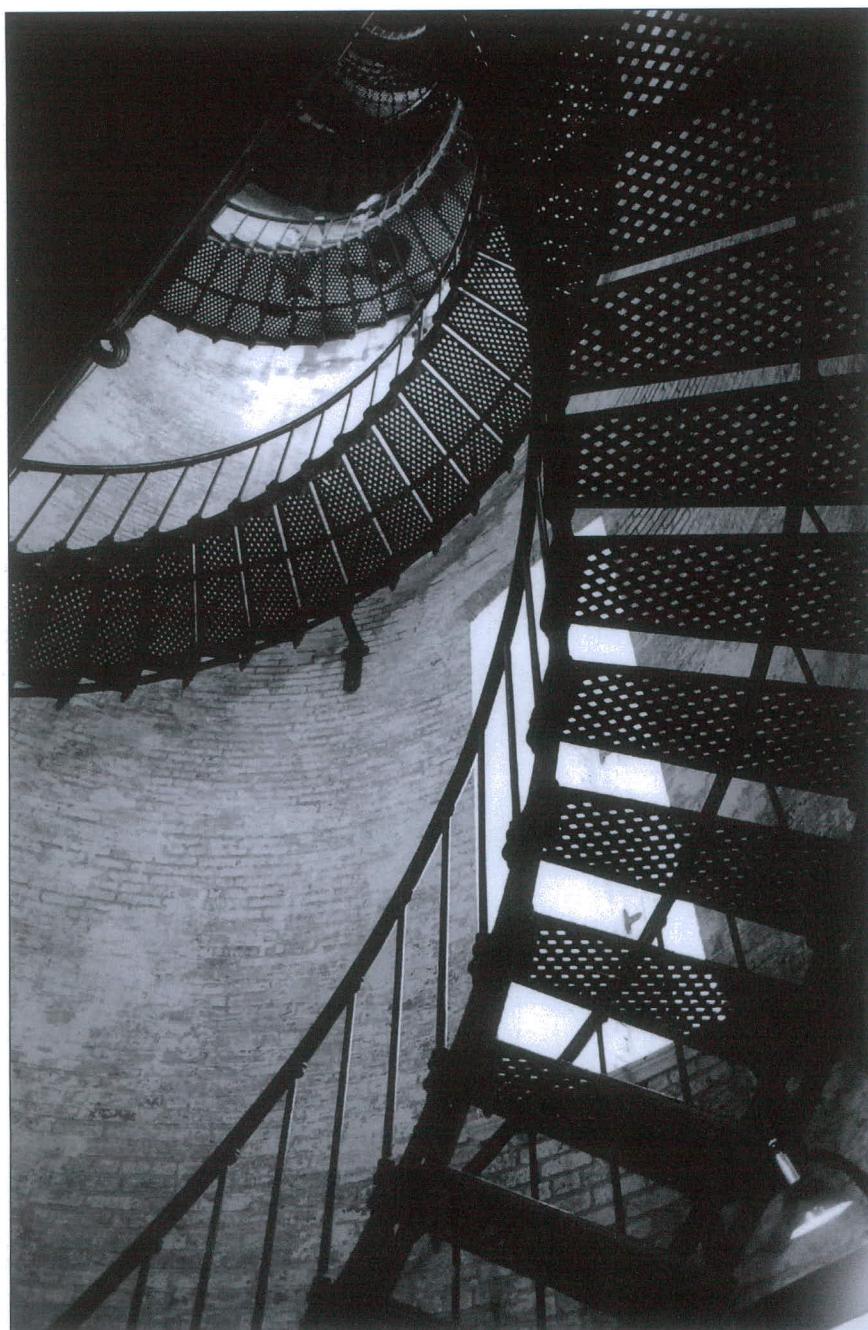
ness that the expense of lost ships, lives, and cargoes far outweighed the expense of the lighthouse estimated at \$178,000.

A tremendous amount of lighthouse work was ongoing along the state's coast during this time. Bodie Island had just been completed and leftover bricks were shipped to Cape Lookout to build a new keeper's quarters. Distinguishing daymarks were painted in black and white "checkers" on Cape Lookout, spirals on Cape Hatteras, and bands on Bodie Island in 1873. This allowed Currituck Beach to wear its natural red brick color as its daymark. Lighted December 1, 1875, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse was the last tall, coastal light to be built by the Lighthouse Service along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. With its first-order Fresnel lens, it shed light on the last dark stretch of featureless shoreline between Cape Henry and Bodie Island for the first time in history. It joined a network of navigational aids on the coast and in the sounds as well as rivers and harbor entrances.

A Gem Is Added to the Coast

Looking at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse and its accompanying keepers' quarters, it is obvious that architects and builders were interested in more than just bricks and mortar. The architectural drawings for the Currituck Beach Lighthouse were the same as used at Bodie Island; however, there are flairs within its details not found in other North Carolina lighthouses.

Dexter Stetson was assigned to this job since he came to the Currituck project after having successfully completed Cape Hatteras and Bodie Island lighthouses. Archived letters and letter indexes indicate that he had been part of the genius behind building these fine lighthouse projects. After completing Bodie Island, he requested a leave of absence January 16, 1873, due to his wife's illness. He likely returned to the job quickly because a letter dated just five days later in January from the Lighthouse Board named Stetson "Superintendent Of Construction of the Currituck Beach light in NC." During this assignment, Stetson had been dealing with his wife's death in 1874. But he continued on the job; according to Lighthouse Service documents, Stetson didn't leave the Currituck project until March 22, 1875, handing his duties over to J.W. Lewis as construction neared conclusion. Stetson was reassigned to other projects until his retirement in 1886.



The graceful 214 cast-iron steps lead to the lantern room. Each landing is attached to the inner brick wall of the tower to provide stability and strength to the entire stair system.

The lighthouse received a more spacious oil room entryway, elliptical brick paths connected all parts of the light station, and an added gem was the two-and-one-half story double keepers' quarters. The keepers' house is a Victorian "stick style" dwelling which was constructed from pre-cut labeled materials that were shipped by barge and assembled on site starting in November 1875.

"Stick style" architecture is also known as Carpenter Gothic of the early 1800s and revived as Renaissance Gothic in the late 1800s with fine wood embellishments and

dramatic, elegant details including wooden finials at the gable ends. The keepers' dwelling was built as a duplex; each side mirrored the other. The downstairs of each house contains three large rooms with fireplaces in each and each side had an attached front porch. A cistern at each end of the house collected rain water as the only source of fresh water. The keepers' house and tower were connected by double walk-ways, two separate yards and a fence that ran down the middle to denote each keeper's area. Although it was meant to house two keepers and their families, the

principal keeper had half of the house and two assistants and their families shared one side of the duplex for several years. When needed, the third floor was also used as a living area to ease overcrowding.

Nearing Completion

Fifth District Engineer Harwood took over the Currituck Beach Lighthouse project from Hains in the summer of 1874. Hains moved on to help at both the Morris Island and St. Augustine Lighthouses, of the same design for Currituck Beach and Bodie Island Lighthouses. Through indexed letters,

Improvements Out of Tragedy

Of the numerous and fatal shipwrecks in the Graveyard of the Atlantic, four made significant impact on life-saving measures. First, the wreck of the *Home* October 9, 1837, near the Ocracoke Lighthouse in which 90 lives were lost, stirred Congress to legislate requirements for ships to carry a life preserver for each passenger. Further historic changes came as a result of three other shipwrecks. On March 1, 1875, the *Nuova Ottavia* wrecked just offshore at Currituck Beach and caused loss of several crewmembers and the entire Jones Hill Life-Saving Station crew. Next, the USS *Huron* (November 24, 1877), went down near the unmanned Nags Head Life-Saving Station during its off-season with a loss of 103; and just 10 weeks later, at least 85 souls were lost in the wreck of the *Metropolis* (January 31, 1878). The *Metropolis* foundered near the Currituck Beach Lighthouse in which the crew of the Life-Saving Station No. 4, Jones Hill, had to trudge nearly five miles with heavy equipment and arrived too tired and too late to help many of the victims. The lighthouse keeper, his two assistants, and several neighbors and friends helped in efforts to house and attend to survivors. Public outcry moved Congress to complete plans that were in progress and, for the first time, life-saving stations were to be professionally staffed around the clock and built about five miles apart to add prompt response to their life-saving techniques.



Note the absence of trees and other foliage that allows a clear view of the Currituck Beach Light Station in this 1883 Herbert Bamber photograph. It is the only coastal lighthouse site in North Carolina where just one tower was erected. Photo courtesy of Outer Banks History Center.

the daily details of completing the light station unfold. Harwood ordered the first-order lighting apparatus August 21, 1875, and just four days later the lens was on its way from the Lighthouse Depot in Tompkinsville, New York (Staten Island). The foreman of the Lamp Shop at the Lighthouse Depot had discovered a damaged prism and, after being repaired, a letter from Lighthouse Depot Engineer I.C. Woodruff on August 25, 1875, recorded the shipment of the lens to Harwood. He wrote a proposed *Notice to Mariners* for lighting the new lens, but he wrote another letter September 16, 1875, having found an error.

Completion was drawing to a close. Harwood suggested a head keeper October 1, 1875. One week later, other keepers and salaries were announced in two letters by Fifth District Inspector Baker. A metallic guide roller for the rotating red bullseye panels was requested that same day and was quickly shipped. Inspector Baker requested coal and wood for the keepers on October 18. Curtain rollers were requested December 13 to hold the protective lantern room curtains that, when drawn closed during the day, shielded the Fresnel lens from damaging heat and sunlight as well as provided a cooler working area for keepers. Directives in *Instructions*

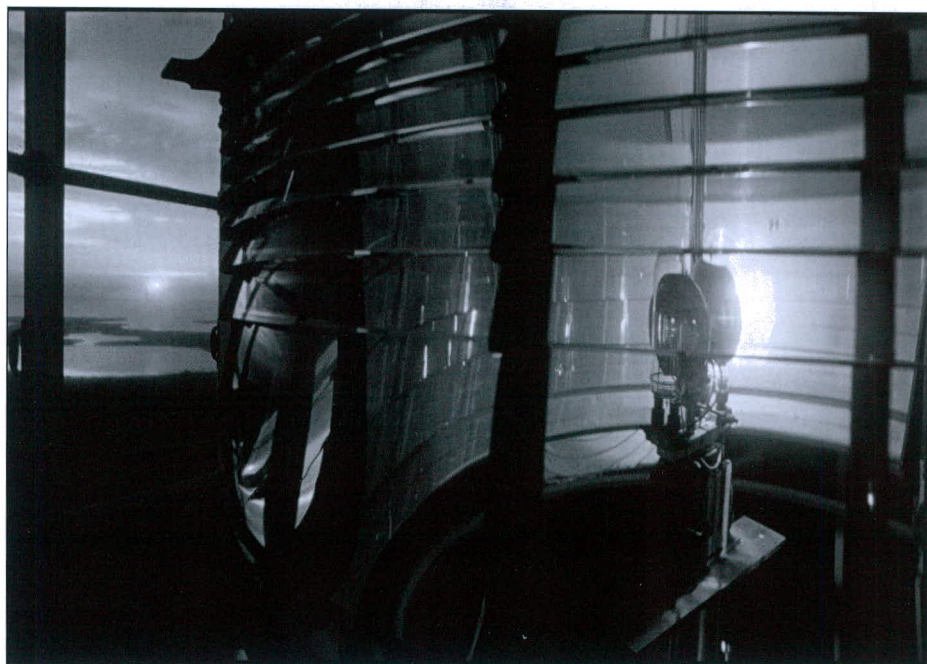
to Employees of the Lighthouse Service, 1881 detail these keepers' duties; further, keepers' children were instructed in these details by their keeper-fathers during the early 20th century. Cleaning glass storm panes, polishing brass, cleaning the crown crystal prisms

of the lens, and keeping every speck of dust off any surfaces in the lantern room required considerable physical labor. Help from the young ones was always welcome.

Supplies for keepers were sent by Lighthouse Service tenders to keep every part of the lighthouse in top condition. A keeper protected a Fresnel lens with paternal passion because the lens magnified light emitted from a lamp at its center to yield an intense beam of light for mariners. And, should the light be out for any reason, a keeper's job was at risk. An emergency, or extra, oil-burning wick "Funck" lamp was requested by Harwood.

The light station was coming to life, and on the evening of Wednesday, December 1, 1875, at long last, mariners saw a light to help them safely navigate this dangerous area.

The lighthouse tower, and a grand one it is, stands approximately 162 feet tall; its focal plane, the center of the lens where light is emitted, is at 158 feet. Its first-order Fresnel lens originally carried a "fixed varied [red] revolving flash" every 90 seconds, which means a white beam shone steadily and was broken by a red flash. A red-glass panel revolved on chariot wheels outside the big lens and was turned by a clockwork mechanism driven by a suspended weight beneath the lantern. A keeper opened an enclosed area within the pedestal on which the huge lens and red panel rested and cranked the weight up by hand every two and one-half hours. Its flame was held by a lamp consisting of



As the sun sets across Currituck Sound, the first-order Fresnel lens is automatically turned on by a photoelectric cell.



Keepers, visitors, children, and family pets have walked this walkway to and from the tower and all around the light station. It is one of the “flairs” of this historic site’s design that gives it a unique personality amongst all other North Carolina lighthouses.

five concentric wicks. The flash characteristic of a fixed-white light accompanied by a red flash varied several times over the years. The red warning flash was produced by glass that was manufactured by adding gold to render it ruby colored. The red sector was eventually removed, likely in 1939 when the U.S. Coast Guard automated the light.

Approximately one-million bricks comprise the lighthouse walls that are five-feet, eight-inches thick at the base and taper to three-feet thick at the parapet under the

lantern room. As with the other tall coastal lights, vertical windows were spaced along the spiral stairs that looked out onto the Atlantic Ocean and Currituck Sound. These windows not only provided natural light along the stairwell during an era before electricity but also allowed a keeper to observe from a birds-eye view any approaching ships. During the late 1800s, keepers helped watch for distressed ships and relayed any news to the nearby Jones Hill Life-Saving Station.

The dignified red-brick lighthouse has

two brick anterooms at the base, one on each side of the entryway. One was used as an office and general work area, and another was built to accommodate barrels of oil. Each was complete with a fireplace and a heavy wooden door that could be closed for warmth; the doors opened into a central passageway that led to the spiral stairs. This made for a comfortable working environment at ground level, although keepers did not live in the lighthouse. In 1896 oil was stored outside the lighthouse for fire-safety reasons.

A wreath of netting around the lantern room area was added for several years to catch waterfowl that were blinded by the light. Sometimes entire flocks dropped into the net as they followed the lead goose. And yes, according to oral histories, they were a welcomed part of dinners for keepers, their families, and villagers.

Upon the grand finale in finishing this last tall, coastal lighthouse that was built in North Carolina, a southerner might have expressed accolades for the Lighthouse Service’s fine job: “They’ve done themselves right proud.”

Keepers’ Duties

During the early 1900s, the lighthouse was manned by three keepers who rotated on “watch.” The Lighthouse Service wanted a keeper in the service room (eighth landing) to be on the lookout for ships in distress, especially during WWI when German submarines were sinking American ships off the North Carolina coast. At the service room level, there are four windows, each facing one of four directions, that yielded a panoramic view.

On any given morning at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, as at any American lighthouse, the keepers were following these instructions:

When the light is extinguished in the morning the keeper must hang the lantern curtains and immediately begin to put the apparatus in order for relighting. While doing this the linen aprons provided for the keeper’s use must be worn, that the lens may not suffer from contact with the wearing apparel. The illuminating apparatus [lamp that sat inside the Fresnel lens] must be carefully covered before the cleaning is begun. The lens and glass of the lantern must be cleaned daily and always kept in the best possible condition. Before beginning to clean the lens it must be brushed with the feather brush to remove all dust. It must then be wiped



Complete restoration has brought the keepers' house back to its original glory, thanks to the perseverance and care by its permanent stewards, Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc. It is the only one surviving of three keepers' houses built of this Victorian "stick style" in America. Once considered an eyesore and asked to be razed by the county, it is now a beautiful addition to the historic district. The house arrived in a "kit" with pre-cut and numbered timber and other labeled materials for assembly. At times, three families shared the house, making it a lively scene with children all about. The two sides of the house mirror one another with a third floor that was used when extra living space was needed. Photos courtesy of the Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc.



with a soft linen cloth, and finally polished with buff-skin....

Keepers had to mix all their cleansers including rouge and whiting for polishing the lens prisms, "rotten-stone" for polishing brass work, and a soda/salt combination for cleaning chimneys. Every keeper had to know how to light a lamp that may have been one of several

different types, and keep the wicks burning as brightly as possible without creating smoke. A keeper's hands were seldom idle.

A Successful Restoration Story

The restoration of this light station reads like a modern-day Cinderella story. Following its automation in 1939, the property

hosted no permanent residents other than birds and mammals that found the deserted area a place of refuge. And, just as the old adage says, "A house not lived in is soon in disrepair," the buildings of the light station, especially the stately keepers' house, fell victim to time and the elements. By the late 1970s, the lighthouse keepers' house looked as if it had been used as a bombing target like those along the beach in WWII. It stood abandoned. The building had no doors or windows; the interior had been vandalized. The sight of this forgotten and neglected light station was nothing short of depressing.

John Wilson IV is the great-grandson of former Keeper Homer T. Austin, Sr. Wilson remembers stories passed down from his mother, Estelle Wilson. Estelle recalled that her grandmother, Orphia, helped her husband, Keeper Austin, by serving him lunch at the top of the lighthouse. Keeper Austin took care of the lighthouse and Grandmother Orphia ran the household and took care of a passel of kids. In this way, caring for a lighthouse was a family affair with duties assigned to everyone and strict schedules to adhere to. In the 1881 handbook given each keeper and his assistant, there are 204 individual rules listed; not following any of these rules meant dismissal.

Four generations later in 1978, Wilson, an architect, saw his great-grandfather's forsaken and windowless keepers' home and dared to dream of returning it to its former glory. Wilson, along with William Parker, Anne Bahr, Meile Rockefeller, and Lee Salet, formed a group for the purpose of restoration and preservation of the light station called the Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc (OBC).

Lighthouse Ownership No "Light" Job

The light station is located on a 30.58-acre site deeded by the federal government to the state in 1952 for muskrat research and other public recreational purposes. Responsibility for the tract, with the exception of the lighthouse that was still owned then by the Coast Guard, was vested in the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. When Wilson offered to restore the house and attend to cleaning up the grounds, the budget-strapped Resources Commission found this a win-win situation. A detailed restoration and maintenance proposal from OBC was approved by the Resources Commission 18 months later and a

Timeline Currituck Beach Light Station

- 1875 (December 1):** Currituck Beach Light Station first-order Fresnel lens illuminated.
- 1876:** The Victorian "stick style" keepers' house completed; three keepers and their families shared the duplex.
- 1886:** Earthquake shook lighthouse.
- 1920s:** An 1880s dwelling moved from Long Point Light Station (depot) to light station as smaller keeper's residence.
- 1939:** Light automated under U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) control and houses abandoned.
- 1952:** Property surrounding lighthouse turned over to N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission for muskrat research.
- 1973:** Light Station listed on National Register of Historic Places.
- 1980 (January):** Outer Banks Conservationists (OBC) formed; OBC signed lease with state of N.C. to begin phased restoration; a consortium of OBC, N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources, U.S. government, and N.C. Wildlife Property successfully applied to obtain entire 30.58 acre tract on the National Register of Historic Places (National Register application filed 1973, pre-OBC, by Division of Archives and History in Raleigh).
- 1990:** OBC negotiated with USCG to open lighthouse to public climbing.
- 1991:** Smaller keeper's house stabilized with help of N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources.
- 1995:** Currituck Beach Light Station restoration considered complete in revival of one of state's most remarkable maritime resources.
- 1999:** Reunion held for Currituck Beach Lighthouse Keepers descendants; oral histories and historic photographs collected.
- 2003 (October):** OBC, Inc. is awarded ownership of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse pursuant to the National Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000.
- 2011:** OBC continues restoration of all parts of light station.

50-year lease for the property was handled by the Department of Cultural Resources.

With that lease in 1980, OBC took on the redoubtable task of restoring the keepers' house, of which only three others of its kind were built in America, earning its architectural significance and honored place on the National Register of Historic Places. It is a two-and-one-half story Victorian "stick style" dwelling that was constructed from pre-cut and labeled materials that were shipped via barge by the Lighthouse Service and assembled on site. Its four grand chimneys and beautiful woodwork throughout the house are just a few of the details that made this house a grand work of art. All restoration work at the light station must be done according to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation as well as guidelines of the North Carolina Secretary of Cultural Resources. It was not until years later that OBC added the lighthouse to its restoration plans. As tourism grew with the completion of N.C. Highway 12 through Duck to Corolla, visitors to the grounds found the spruced-up lighthouse grounds intriguing. Thus, getting the tower ready for public access seemed the natural thing to do and OBC proceeded with the plan—no small job.

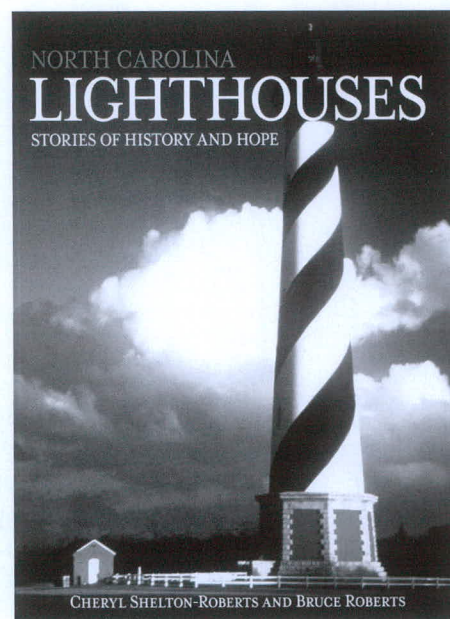
In 1990 OBC convinced the Coast Guard to allow them to begin work on the lighthouse itself and were handed the keys.

Old, flaking paint was scraped from the tower's interior and new paint applied. Iron railings were refurbished and layers of paint removed from the brass hardware which was once again given its gleam. The USCG owns and maintains the light while OBC takes the lead in repairs and makes sure the light, still emitted by a 1,000-watt bulb, remains bright.

When OBC staff members began work at the lighthouse complex, they came upon quite a surprise hidden beneath entangled vines and smothered by overgrowth: the small, circa 1880 keeper's house. Once used to house one assistant keeper and his family, it had fallen into such a dilapidated condition that it was feared restoration would be in vain. Remarkably, by 1995, it had been returned to perfect condition and now houses a museum/gift store. This small museum/gift shop was once a keeper's quarters on Long Point Light Station 8 (depot) across Coinjock Bay that had been moved to the Currituck Beach Light Station during the 1920s.

Over a course of 15 years (1980-1995), restoration efforts returned the structures to their former grace and beauty. Every detail has been attended to in the name of preserving history as well as keeping in mind the educational benefits to visitors for having come here. There's even shade during the heat of summer under the trees that have

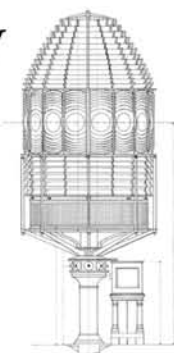
been planted after studying native plants. It all fits together to create a scene typically that of southern grace, a busy light station, and a place for exploration and discovery.



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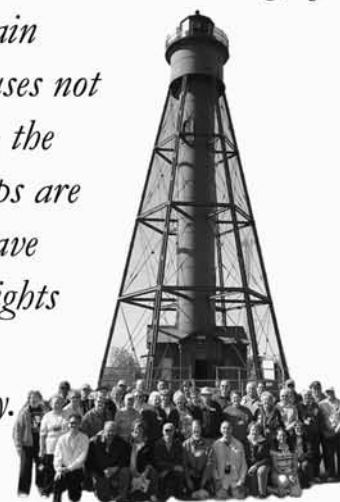
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