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LIGHTHOUSE UPDATE

As we reported in the last Old News, the deed to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse was officially transferred to OBC on October 17 of last year. Let's bring you up to date on what's happened since then:

The Coast Guard has recently ruled that \$180,000 that was held in escrow at the time of the transfer at the request of Rep. Walter Jones can, in fact, be used as originally intended for repairs and maintenance of the lighthouse property. This ruling is very good news for other groups contemplating a



transfer of a lighthouse from the federal government, assuring that funds collected from visitor fees and used for the benefit of the lighthouse property are not tampered with.

OBC is still awaiting a ruling from the Inspector General of Homeland Security as to whether the \$108,000 OBC spent to prepare

the transfer application and for legal fees over the two years must be paid to the federal treasury. OBC's position is that preparing the 1,000-page application for the transfer process is a legitimate expense and that everyone has a right to legal counsel. We'll let you know next newsletter what happens here.



The Mission of Outer Banks Conservationists...

...is to protect natural, cultural, and historic resources through preservation and conservation of a sense of place, and through public education, interpretation, and outreach, to instill these values in others for the benefit of future generations.

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Old News

Circa 2004
The Latest from Outer Banks Conservationists
Keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse

FOCUS ON THE LIGHT KEEPERS

HORATIO HEATH

(SERVED 1877-1885)

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. Born in the late 1830s somewhere in Pasquotank County, North Carolina, he spent his years as a young adult working the Pasquotank River and Albemarle Sound. By the mid 1870s, he was married to Mary Mizelle and had been a keeper at the Bodie Island Lighthouse for several years. 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.

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 Heaths and the original keepers at Currituck. In the summer of 1878,



Horatio Heath served as Keeper of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from 1877 until 1885.

someone, probably 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.

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. 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. 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:

Continued on page 2

Keeper's Log, Nov. 2004



Keepers, Jenn Barr and John Birkholz

Photo Credit: Melody Leckle

Most people are surprised when they hear that there are present-day lighthouse keepers at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. We hear many times, "What could you possibly do this day and age

other than switch on the light each night?" Although many of the job responsibilities have changed since the original keepers lived and worked on the lighthouse compound between 1875 and 1939, the upkeep of the three acres, the lighthouse, the two keepers' houses, cisterns, privy, brick walkways is still part of the current keepers' job responsibilities. We no longer have to light the light, but we do have to prepare for and host the more than 100,000 visitors we receive each year. Days include mowing the grass, tending to the gardens, painting, cleaning, performing emergency repairs, preparing and cleaning up after storms, supervising our staff of 15 docents and assistants, hosting weddings and events, giving tours to adult and school groups,



This photo of the little keeper's house was taken in the 1980s, before the restoration.



A new standing-seam metal roof was recently completed on the little keeper's house. The new roof replicates the house's original roof.

handling the finances, and attending and presenting at lighthouse conferences.

One of our most exciting recent projects was the completion of a tin roof on the little keeper's house to replicate the house's original roof. This project was put on hold in September 2003 due to Hurricane Isabel, and a year later it is now completed and painted. The expert craftsmen at Gordon Sheet Metal were able to use tools and techniques that would have been employed when the original roof was constructed.

Our responsibilities as light keepers are many, although we make time to enjoy our surroundings including bike riding, swimming and assisting in finding homes for some of the feral cats in the area. And sometimes during the quiet winter months we help with

relocating some of the wild horses that escape from their preserve.

We realize what a unique and wonderful opportunity we have following in the footsteps of the keepers before us. Fortunately, our days run smoothly and our visitors receive attention and assistance, which is due mostly to our wonderful, hardworking lighthouse staff. We would like to thank the following docents who have worked in the

heat of the summer answering a million and one questions over the past three-plus years: Bea Berle, Brenda Grantham, Laura Kristof, Valerie Morell, Kit Price, Pat Reed, Pat Riley, Cindy Ward, and Connie Wirtz. As the season draws to a close, we look forward to the adventures yet to come.

Continued from the front page

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.

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 their daughters, Sally and Lula.

Horatio, it is clear, was a determined man who took his work at the lighthouse seriously then became a self-made businessman after he retired from the service. But the image of him as a loving husband and caring community member completes the impression we have of him.

*Adapted from original text by Jenny Edwards

SEVERAL DESCENDANTS OF HORATIO HEATH WERE PARTICULARLY HELPFUL IN COMPILING THE INFORMATION FOR THIS PROFILE. 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. LIKE HER SISTER, MARY POWELL IS A RETIRED SCHOOL TEACHER. SHE WAS BORN ON MAY 24, 1914. BEVERLY WRIGHT, A GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER OF HORATIO AND MARY, WAS BORN APRIL 18, 1933, AND IS ALSO A RETIRED SCHOOL TEACHER.

HEATH FAMILY GIVES ITEMS TO LIGHTHOUSE COLLECTION

Outer Banks Conservationists has focused attention recently on collecting furniture, pictures and other belongings of past keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Says Bill Parker, chair of the OBC board, "It's great to have any artifact from the lighthouse keepers eras, but when you have pieces that you know were specifically from a Currituck keeper, the history of this place is brought to life. It's easier for us to envision life here in this special place."

Horatio Heath was keeper at Currituck Beach Light from 1877 to 1885. Family members, including great granddaughter Beverly Wright, have generously contributed furniture and other articles from their personal collections. As Wright puts it, "It's nice to know the Heath things have arrived safely back home."



Photos (clockwise from top left):

Horatio and Mary's older daughter, Sallie, painted this pastel while she was in school at Chowan College. Painting was a lifelong hobby for Sallie, and family members were the lucky recipients of her works through the years.

The Diapering Chair was situated beside the fireplace so that when Heath's wife, Mary, changed the babies' diapers, their bottoms wouldn't get cold.

This Whatnot Shelf was constructed so that the spindles could be unscrewed, allowing the piece to lay flat if necessary. It has been suggested that Heath made the piece, but as Bev Wright explains it, many family members scoff at the idea since the shelf is too pretty. Her great grandfather's work was mostly nautical in theme and decorated with stars and anchors.



HERITAGE PARK For several years now, OBC has held the vision of partnering with Currituck County, the Whalehead Club and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission to create a collective welcome for visitors and locals. With contiguous property and a unified respect for the cultural and environmental history of the area, these partners are working on an area they call Heritage Park. It encompasses the Whalehead Club property, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse and surrounds the soon-to-be open Wildlife Center. OBC hopes that, in the near future, visitors will be able to purchase admission to all three sites under one ticket. And, certainly, the collaborative effort will allow visitors to get a more complete sense of this area's history, a history without the borders of modern ownership.



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