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P.O. Box 970, Manteo, NC 27954

Support Historic Preservation



## LIGHTHOUSE UPDATE

Two years after it was awarded the deed of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from the Department of Interior, Outer Banks Conservatonists continues to face hindrances from Currituck County. At present, Outer Banks Conservatonists (OBC) is being sued by Currituck County for alleged zoning violations at the lighthouse.

The Currituck Beach Lighthouse was one of about 300 lighthouses made available to federal, state and local agencies, nonprofit corporations, educational agencies or community development organizations under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act (NHLPA) of 2000. The NHLPA was established to provide a smooth transition of the federally owned historic light stations to new owners.

But the transition of ownership of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from the federal government to OBC has been anything but smooth.

Since the beginning of the lighthouse transfer process, OBC has spent more than \$400,000 in legal fees trying to hold on to the lighthouse. This is money that could have been spent on restoration and upkeep at the lighthouse and compound. This expense concerns OBC and many others.

"Frankly, we're concerned for other groups," says John Wilson, founding member and one of the directors of OBC. "We don't want them to have the same struggles we have had. The National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act was not meant to cost nonprofits so much money."

Indiana Congressman Mark Souder, who introduced the bill that became the NHLPA, is also concerned. He is aware of the struggles and expense Outer Banks Conservatonists has faced, and he recognizes that the Currituck Beach Lighthouse is a case that could set the precedent in other lighthouse transfer situations.

"Five years ago, I authored the National Lighthouse Preservation Act because we needed a clearly defined transfer system for the preservation of the historic landmarks that populate our shores," said Congressman Souder. "This law was written to give priority consideration to the local

citizens' groups that had already taken care of lighthouses - at great expense in terms of time and cost - over the years. For considerable time now, I have been angry and frustrated with the Currituck Beach Lighthouse situation, which has not followed the process approved by Congress and the President in 2000. I worry that it could set a very disturbing precedent for the rest of the nation."

Of about 300 lighthouses eligible for transfer, only 26 have changed hands since 2001, said Brian Sweatland of the National Park Service. Overall, he said, the transfer process has been smooth. "As often as not, it's a single applicant or someone who has partnered with the Coast Guard," said Sweatland. "In only a couple of instances has there been a controversy or a complaint about the transfer."

Both the nonprofit OBC and the County of Currituck Board of Commissioners submitted applications for ownership of the lighthouse in February 2003. The National Park Service Review Committee rated the two applications in March 2003 and voted in favor of OBC. Currituck County appealed that decision and requested a review. The final decision on the disposition of the lighthouse rested with the Secretary of the Interior, who delegated that responsibility to Craig Manson, Assistant Secretary of Fish and Wildlife and Parks. Manson upheld the original decision of the Review Committee. No further appeals were permitted.

Now Currituck County is alleging that OBC does not provide sufficient on-premise restrooms (even though OBC helped pay for the restrooms as a joint project with the county) and that there is not enough parking at the lighthouse.

Judge Terrence Boyle heard the initial motions in Federal court on Monday, July 11, 2005, and both parties are still awaiting his decision.

In the meantime, OBC is operating the lighthouse as usual. Around 100,000 people visit the Currituck Beach Lighthouse every year.

## The Mission of Outer Banks Conservatonists...

...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.

Outer Banks Conservatonists, Inc.  
Post Office Box 970, Manteo, NC 27954

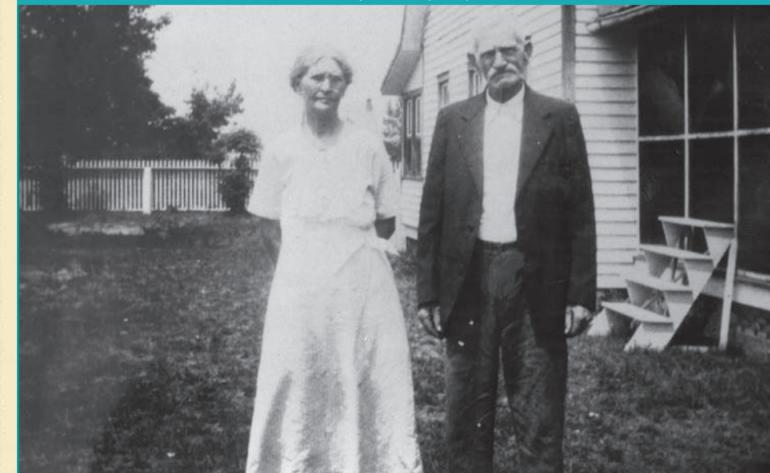
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# Old News

Circa 2005  
The Latest from Outer Banks Conservatonists  
Keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse

LIGHTKEEPERS OF THE PAST

## William Riley Austin and Lovie Peele Austin (1891-1929)



Before lighthouses were automated in 1939, the role of lighthouse keepers was paramount. It was the lightkeepers and their families who animated the lighthouses, who kept the lights burning and who filled the houses and grounds with activity and life. Their personal stories are often as fascinating as those of the mariners who looked to the lights for safety.

William Riley Austin and his wife, Lovie Peele Austin, along with their family, certainly brought life to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Riley, as Austin was called, served at Currituck Beach Lighthouse for 38 years, the longest tenure of any keeper in the lighthouse's 130-year history.

William Riley Austin was a native Outer Banker, born in the hamlet of Trent (now Frisco) on Hatteras Island in 1859 to a family of seafaring stock. His ancestors had lived on the Outer Banks since Thomas Austin shipwrecked on Hatteras Island around the turn of the 19th century and decided

to stay. Riley followed his forefathers into a career on the sea. He worked on freighters, transporting lumber sawn on Hatteras Island to Philadelphia. But Riley didn't stay at sea for long. During one of his voyages at sea, the ship he was working on foundered in severe weather off the Virginia coast. Riley survived and came home, rattled enough to know that life is too short not to be with the ones you love. He asked his sweetheart, Lovie Peele, to marry him. But Lovie refused. She said she wouldn't marry a sailor. So Riley traded his seaman's life for a marriage vow. He quit his job on the freighter and married Lovie.

Riley was fortunate to get a secure government position with the lighthouse service. There weren't many steady jobs on the Outer Banks in those days, and a government service job at a lighthouse or life-saving station was a great boon. His appointment was as the second assistant keeper at the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, not far from his home. The Austins had three children while at Cape Hatteras,

(William) Edgar, Pell and John.

In 1891, Riley was transferred to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, also as the second assistant keeper under principal keeper, Lazarus Hinnant, and first assistant keeper, Fabius Simpson. He and Lovie and their three boys moved into the north end of the Keepers' Quarters along with Simpson and his family. This was before the Little Keeper's Quarters was on the property, so the principal keeper lived in the six rooms on the south end of the double Keepers' Quarters, while the first and second assistants had to share the six rooms on the north end of the house.

In 1893, Simpson left and Riley's brother Wesley Austin came on as the first assistant keeper. The two brothers shared the north end of the Keepers' Quarters and worked together at Currituck Beach Lighthouse for almost two decades. Wesley and his wife, Belle Barnett Austin, brought with them three girls - Iola, Sarah and Maude. This meant that there were four adults and six children sharing their half of the Keepers' Quarters. But that was nothing compared to all the children to come.

While Riley and Wesley "burned the midnight oil" to keep the lighthouse shining, tended the grounds, and hunted and fished to supplement the food for their families, Lovie and Belle were busy as well. The two wives must have worked closely in the kitchen, with the housework and watching children. Plus the women had to keep the house in tip-top shape in case the lighthouse inspector dropped by. And, the two women were also busy delivering and taking care of babies.

While she was living at Currituck Beach Lighthouse, Lovie delivered four girls in the Keepers' Quarters - Jennie, Gertrude, Ruth and Fannie. Belle had five more children in the Keepers' Quarters - Walter, Leon, Monford, Ruth and Wilma. Assuming that there were at least a few years in which all 15 children lived there at once, there could have been as many as 19 Austins living in just half of the Keepers' Quarters at one time. Remember, there were only six rooms!

O.S. Austin, grandson of Riley, remembers his grandfather slept in the attic and would

Continued on page 2

## Keeper's Log

November, 2005



Lighthouse Keeper Luis Garcia, Site Manager Meghan Agresto and their son, Benicio.

Every evening, whether we've left the compound or not, Luis and I look up to the lens room of the lighthouse. Is the light on? Are we looking too early? Did it just illuminate for three seconds, hence the darkness?

The first time the light didn't come on was after a storm in July. By then we had been the keepers for a few months and had become accustomed to the light coming on automatically as darkness set in. We had walked outside a little before 9 p.m. and something didn't feel right. The compound wasn't quite dark yet (and it gets so dark that you can literally not see anything), so we weren't depending on the light to come on to guide our steps. It was more of a feeling. We looked at each other and realized at the same time that this was to be our first adventure with an unlit tower. Could we trouble-shoot the fuse boxes? If we placed a steady stream high-powered bulb in the lens room and let it shine all night, would that be enough to announce to any Luddite mariners that land was near? If we pled with the Coast Guard, could they arrive before Corolla's residents noticed?

What we hadn't realized until then is just what a hollow feeling an un-illuminated lighthouse can instill. Granted, it also generated a bit of panic in us, but it was that night that we forgot about the grounds, the carpenter bees, keeping up with lighthouse keepers' descendents, staff uniforms, tour groups, "our" feral cats, and the other things that we spend our time on as modern day lighthouse keepers. We felt the looming presence of the darkened lens and Fresnel prisms. We also realized that 17 seconds of darkness is not as arbitrary as we originally thought. Like castanet players who depend on a 17-count beat, we had come to feel the rhythm of this light. Lucky for us, the sense of gloom that was growing in and around us ended soon as Luis found the troubled fuse and fixed it before total darkness settled.

Luis and I applied for these jobs thinking that with my non-profit experience and his manual skills we'd be perfect for the job. But the more we live in the Keepers' House the more we understand that this job requires something else, something even more important than a love of lighthouses. This is a job that calls for a passion for keeping alive the history of a place that was home to families who were dedicated to keeping the fire burning at the top of the tower. We love imagining what room babies were born in, where the keepers slept when they were off duty, and how much noise people on one side of the keepers' duplex could hear on the other side. We also relish stories of people who knew the squatters who came after the house was deserted, those

people who left graffiti on much of the wood of the house. We hear whispers of people who know people who still have original woodwork that they took from the house, thinking it would look better in their house than in the abandoned duplex. Keeping the history alive and available and ensuring that the beacon, which today may instill more romance than safety, burns bright, are duties we are more than glad to assume.

We could not be open daily for nine months without the dedication of incredible staff members who also understand how maintaining history both perpetuates it and creates it. We are indebted to their generosity and the warmth with which they have welcomed us. Thanks to Pat Riley, our Assistant Keeper, who has worked here in every capacity for more than 10 years; to Rick Galganski who works on the grounds very early morning and also works as a docent; to Pat Reed who is steadfast and fearlessly gives tours; to Valerie Morell who knows more about lighthouses than most; to Connie Wirtz who graciously accepts shifts that she isn't expecting; to Brenda Grantham, our preservationist-at-heart, who works both here and at the Whalehead Club; to Cindy Ward who finds time to work here on top of another full-time job; to Bea Berle who adds character and fulgurite education to our Sunday mornings; to Randy Johnson who has returned for two summers after her high school internship here; and to Marlene Glisson our high school intern who stood at the top of the lighthouse 40 hours a week this summer.

## Coming Attraction:

# The Island Farm

Outer Banks Conservationists' preservation project on Roanoke Island, The Island Farm, will be open as a public attraction by the summer of 2007. When it is open to the public, The Island Farm will offer a glimpse into the life of a mid-19th-century farming/fishing family.

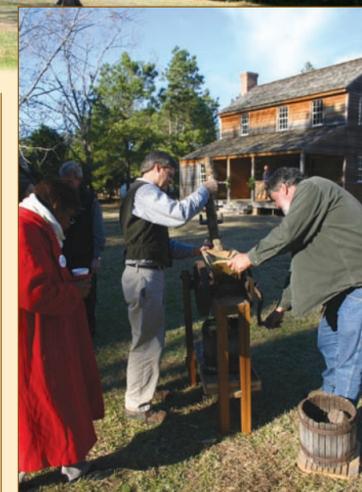
The Island Farm, also known as the Etheridge Homeplace, traces its beginnings back to 1783 when Jesse Etheridge acquired the land. The house that stands on the property was built by Jesse's grandson, Adam Dough Etheridge, between 1845 and 1850.

Archeologists, historians, preservation carpenters and volunteers have already accomplished much of the restoration of The Island Farm. The main house has been restored, and a barn, corncrib, kitchen, dairy, privy, smokehouse and slave house have been reconstructed on site. A livestock barn was moved to the site from Franklin County and restored. A rail fence enclosure for livestock will be constructed next.

Historians are planning interpretive programming so that The Island Farm can tell the story of the past with livestock and interpreters. Historic furnishings, housewares and livestock still need to be acquired, and interpretation, parking and restrooms will be provided before the site opens.

In the meantime, those who pass by the site on Highway 64 on the north end of Roanoke Island enjoy watching the progress of the project. The Island Farm already has the look of an historic farm, with its unpainted house and outbuildings and the sheep of a local weaver grazing in the pasture out front. A local weaver's guild meets in the house for now, carrying on the legacy of weaving that was done here in the 1860s.

The Island Farm will be one of the sites on the Manteo Preservation Trust's Holiday Homes Tour in December 2005. This will be a rare chance for the public to view the interior of this coming attraction. The tour will be held Sunday,



Making fresh apple cider in an antique apple press at Christmas.

December 11 from 2 to 7 p.m. It is recommended that tour attendees visit the Farm early in the day during daylight. For more information, contact Debbie Montgomery of the Manteo Preservation Trust at (252) 473-9717. Advance tickets are available by calling this number or at Manteo Booksellers.

For more information about The Island Farm, visit [www.theislandfarm.com](http://www.theislandfarm.com)

## Austin continued

have to yell down for the kids to be quiet so he could get some rest. O.S. also remembers that his grandfather had an unusual gait, almost like he was still climbing the lighthouse stairs even when he was on flat ground. When Riley Austin wasn't working he was busy gardening and fishing.

Wesley and Belle left Corolla in 1912. Wesley got the job of principal keeper at the Ocracoke Island Lighthouse. Their older girls had already married local Currituck boys, and they remained in the area with their families. Wesley and Belle spent the rest of their days in Ocracoke.

Riley was made first assistant keeper in 1916, but he never became principal keeper. Riley retired in 1929, after 38 years of service at Currituck Beach Light, and moved into Corolla village, where he devoted much of his time to gardening. The Austin family name lives on in Corolla today. One of Riley's grandchildren, Gene Austin, served as the keeper at Currituck Beach Lighthouse from 1964 to 1990. Riley's son, John, and John's son, Norris, both served as the postmasters of Corolla for decades. Norris, his brother Ottley, and Ottley's son Scott Austin still live in Corolla, as does the grandson of Riley and Lovie's daughter Fannie, Keith Johnson.



J.W. Austin, P.B. Austin  
These names are found carved in the attic of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse Double Keepers' Quarters, dated May 18, 1914. Norris Austin of Corolla says they are the initials of his father, John Wendell Austin, and uncle, Pell Burrus Austin, two of the seven children of Riley and Lovie Austin.

## CURRITUCK BEACH AWARD

Congratulations to Melody Leckie, finance officer and assistant to the board of Outer Banks Conservationists. On October 22, Melody was awarded The Currituck Beach Award from the Outer Banks Lighthouse Society for her efforts towards public awareness during the lighthouse application process.

"Melody has been a good friend to us," said Bett Padgett, president of the Outer Banks Lighthouse Society. "We constantly bombard her with questions about the status of the Currituck County lawsuit and the lighthouse, and she has kept us up to date. She always gives us her time and we appreciate that."

Melody has worked for Outer Banks Conservationists since April 1993 and is truly dedicated to the organization and to lighthouse preservation.

## HISTORICAL RESOURCES

### NEEDS YOUR HELP

The N.C. Division of Historical Resources is currently compiling a roster of North Carolinians who served in Confederate Naval service in support of the North Carolina Troops Series.

The assistance of historians and genealogists from all across the state is greatly needed in identifying North Carolinians who served as Confederate Sailors or Marines.

For more information on this effort or to pass along any information in support of this roster please contact:

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The story of saving the Currituck Beach Lighthouse is proof of the power of private citizens and non-profit organizations coming together to support a worthy cause.

Thank you to everyone who has supported Outer Banks Conservationists, both in funding and in action, over the years.

We could not have done it without you!