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## LIGHTHOUSE UPDATE

What are some of the qualities a modern-day lighthouse keeper must possess? Adaptability might top the list. This past winter, the lighthouse staff was awaiting the arrival of International Chimney Corporation to paint the lighthouse stairs. The stairs needed scraping, priming and painting before visitors began arriving in April. But when International Chimney arrived, they had something different in mind.

"They thought it was a higher priority to replace the windows in the lantern room," says Site Manager Meghan Agresto.

Some of the windows in the lantern room, which houses the Fresnel lens and the dual-lamp system, were cracked and needed replacing with a higher-quality glass. International Chimney replaced the windows, which was the first major replacement in more than 60 years. But that left just one problem — who was going to paint the stairs?

Before taking the job as Lighthouse Keeper, Luis Garcia had actually worked as a professional painter. With some guidance and a recommendation on the right types of primer and paint from International Chimney, Garcia decided to take on the job, having no idea of the enormity of the task that lay before him.

In the next month and a half, Garcia worked seven days a week, eight hours a day, almost single-handedly scraping off 10-year-old paint, cleaning up paint chips and dust, priming and brushing layers of thick paint onto 214 stairs, nine landings and nearly 1,000 banisters. His process was to prime and paint every other stair so that he would always have a dry place to stand. Fortunately, old lead paint had already been removed from the tower in 1992. Still, the worst part, Garcia says, was the constant scraping. "I had no idea how much work it was going to be," he says. "It was almost too much for me."

But on the bright side, Garcia said he enjoyed the variation in his usual routine. "I figured we needed to get it done, and it was something different for me to do."

By the time the first visitors arrived in April, the new windows in the lantern room were gleaming in the sun, the stairs winding up the tower were painted a shiny green, and Garcia was glad to be back to his normal light-keeping routines.



## 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.

Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc.  
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# Old News

Circa 2006  
The Latest from Outer Banks Conservationists  
Keepers of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse

LIGHTKEEPERS OF THE PAST

## Nathan Swain Francis Alice Swain Served 1905-1920



As much a part of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse as the ever-present beacon shining out to sea are the stories of the lighthouse keepers and their families who lived and worked in the keepers' quarters through the years. Numerous keepers and their spouses and families came and went, intermingling with the people of Corolla village and leaving their own unique mark on the history of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

Captain Nathan H. Swain was appointed principal keeper of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse on October 1, 1905. Upon his hiring, his salary was \$720 per year. Swain was transferred to the Currituck Beach Lighthouse from the North River Light Station in North Carolina, where he had been making \$560 per year.

As principal keeper, Swain and his wife, Alice, who everyone called Mrs. Captain Swain, lived on the south side of the double keepers' house, with their young daughter,

Nellie. Swain's two assistant keepers had already been on staff at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse for quite some time. First assistant Wesley Austin and his wife, Belle, had been at Currituck Beach since 1893. Second assistant William Riley Austin and his wife, Lovie, had been there since 1891.

Both of the Austin families were quite large, so the Currituck Beach Lighthouse compound at this time was a very lively place. Riley and Lovie had seven children, and Wesley and Belle had eight children.

Nellie was the Swain's only child. Captain and Mrs. Swain had suffered through many miscarriages and stillbirths before Nellie, though finally when Mrs. Swain had almost given up hope, a little girl survived. And, though Nellie was their only child by birth, it is said that the Swains had other children, for they generously took in various foster children during their tenure at the lighthouse and made efforts to make sure that they got a good education at the Corolla village school.

After she left Corolla, Nellie had three daughters, who are today known as Marie Guard, Gay S. Day and Carole Large. In 1999, these three granddaughters of Nathan and Alice Swain spoke to the author of *To Illuminate the Dark Space*, a book of oral histories about the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, on what their mother had told them about growing up at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

The daughters say their mother told them that her father was very serious about the value of a good education, especially his daughter's. Even though they were living in one of the most remote and isolated stretches of the North Carolina coast, Captain Swain made sure that Nellie was well-educated.

Gay remembers that her mother said her father [Captain Swain] hired the first teacher for the Corolla school and that the teacher lived with her parents at the Currituck Beach Light Station. Her mother told her that 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. One of Captain Swain's primary requirements was that the teacher be qualified to also teach Nellie piano lessons.

Captain Swain, who was described as a tall and elegant man, also made sure that his daughter grew up refined, with the proper etiquette required of a turn-of-the-century lady.

Carol remembers things her mother told her about this. "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... The other children on the beach there that she played with were allowed to run barefooted, but her father didn't consider that appropriate for her. She was not allowed to do that." Gay remembers her mother telling her that her father was very strict with her.

When Nellie told her daughters about her life at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, she recalled how busy it was. Her father and the assistant keepers not only kept the lighthouse beacon shining, but they were also responsible for all the maintenance of the site and for providing food for their families. Swain kept hogs at Alice's family farm near present-day Moyock

Continued on page 2

## Swain continued

and went across the sound to help tend to them in his time off from the lighthouse. It is said that Swain enjoyed animals but that he could not stand to see them killed, even if fresh meat was welcome food for the table.

The keepers were expected to keep the grounds immaculate, and family members were expected to help out. Marie remembers that her grandfather's work schedule at the lighthouse was very rigorous. The women kept the keepers' quarters spotless along with doing the cooking and laundry. When she was not busy with school, homework and piano lessons, Nellie was often busy with chores. She milked the cow and ironed her father's uniform collars so that they stood up stiffly.

It is said that lighthouse keepers in other areas loathed the unexpected visits of lighthouse inspectors, but the Swains looked forward to the visits from Lighthouse Inspector W. J. Tate, who lived across the Currituck Sound in Coinjock. Captain Swain and Tate were good friends, and Tate always stayed over at the Swains to enjoy a good meal and spend the night. Marie was often there for Tate's visits, and she remembers that they were happy occasions. Alice Swain and Tate's wife, Sophia, were also good friends, so that they all treated one another like family.

Nathan Swain stayed on as principal keeper until 1920; Loren Tillett took over as principal keeper in 1921. First assistant keeper Wesley Austin had left the Currituck Beach Lighthouse in 1913, and second assistant keeper Riley Austin stayed on until 1928.



Nellie Swain and Walter Riley Austin, son of Wesley and Belle Austin.

## Remembering Mr. Kit



One of Currituck Beach Lighthouse's great friends passed away on March 24, 2006. Clarence Miller "Kit" Price, known as "Mr. Kit," was a devoted employee at the Light Station since 1990, the year OBC opened the lighthouse to the public.

Mr. Kit worked on the grounds of the lighthouse, and he was most dedicated to one particular project — keeping the bricks in the walkways level. Because the bricks are set in sand, they are constantly settling and shifting. Add in storms and the high amount of foot-traffic, and maintaining the brick walkways becomes a tedious task. "Kit spent several hours every week patiently digging out with a trowel and re-setting bricks," says former keeper Lloyd Childers. "I'm not sure we could have found anybody else with his patience for the job."

Childers says that Mr. Kit came to be one of her best friends and was a favorite among the lighthouse staff. "He was quite the kidder," says Childers. "He told wild tales and jokes. He loved all women, he dressed to kill at our parties, and he loved to have a good time. He was a dear man who was very devoted to the lighthouse."

## Keepers Log 2006

Lighthouse Keeper, Luis Garcia  
Site Manager, Meghan Agresto



The past year has been a busy one. As I write this we've seen more than 85,000 lighthouse climbers, we're planning on having more than 400 people attend the third annual Haunted Village that we co-sponsor, we're preparing for the visit from the assessors from the Conservation Assessment Program (see the short article about the CAP in this newsletter) and just this afternoon we're expecting 100 Girl Scouts and their parents from the Currituck County mainland. Our efforts to continue to meet our mission -- heritage preservation and education within the local and national communities -- have kept us on our toes in a spot that many people equate with rest and tranquility.

An end to the county's legal case against us means that we are again official members of the Currituck Heritage Park. Not only does that mean that I am an ex officio non-voting member of the Whalehead Preservation Trust's board of directors (and the Whalehead Club's executive director a member of ours), but also that overall communication has improved with the Whalehead Club and has started off on a good foot with the newly opened Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education. We share parking, public bathrooms and the coordination of groups that want to tour each site in the Park. Our real hope in being part of the Park, though, is to work with these organizations to create a seamless understanding of Corolla's local heritage. The Center for Wildlife Education hosted the two meetings we had with the Conservation Assessment Program assessors, and staff from both the Whalehead Club and the Center for Wildlife Education attended the meetings.

The cooperative spirit felt here surpasses professional relationships. Recently we have experienced a rise in the number of people wanting to volunteer for us. Seven of the 10 actors for the Haunted

Village were volunteers. And this past August, we were thrilled to have Nanette Hunter return as a volunteer docent. Nanette is a history buff, not a beach-goer, so when her family comes to vacation in Corolla, she spends her mornings here greeting visitors and educating them about the site.

For those of you who would like to volunteer but do not come to Corolla often, we'd be glad for your help in another way: We are in the beginning stages of gathering information from descendants and genealogists about the family trees of lighthouse keepers and their descendants. We are hoping to be able to compile the information here on site and to share the family trees and photos online both through our website and perhaps through an internet genealogy service. If you would like to help, please let me know.

While preservation of the rich cultural heritage of the past is paramount to us, our mission also includes instilling values of preservation and conservation in current and future generations. For years we have cooperated in a successful intern program with the Currituck County High School. This year, Andrea Robertson spent five days a week at the top of the lighthouse, educating visitors about the county's heritage, the sound and the lighthouse itself. In addition to our efforts to educate a local student and have her share her heritage with visitors, we continue to have dozens of school groups from all over North Carolina visit the lighthouse annually to reinforce their 4th and 8th grade Graveyard of the Atlantic history curriculum. We love having their insight and exuberance here on site.

Luis and I look forward to another year of community involvement and of our own continued education. The new Keeper's Cottage will be finished soon. The process of finding contractors, agreeing on goals and dates and making sure the work is completed has been a real learning process for me. Over the winter we're looking forward to finishing some renovations on the west facade of the Keepers' House and to working with Melody Leckie, our financial officer, to learn how to digitize a hand-drawn tree map we've finished of the compound. Next year we'll begin planning another descendants' reunion, so expect the quick pace of the lighthouse keepers' lives to stay steady!

--Meghan Agresto

## Lighthouse Ownership:

# Struggle for Lighthouse is Over!

After a five-year struggle over the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, Outer Banks Conservationists (OBC) and Currituck County have reached an agreement that allows OBC to maintain control of the lighthouse.

On April 21, 2006, Currituck County commissioners voted 3-0 (two members were absent) to drop the county's lawsuit stating that OBC and the federal government, which retains an interest in the lighthouse, were not complying with the county's zoning ordinances. The commissioners agreed to accept the fact that the lighthouse is immune from county land-use regulations as long as the U.S. government retains its interest in the structure.

The battle for control of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse has a long and storied past. Outer Banks Conservationists spent well over a million dollars in private funds restoring the lighthouse and its surrounding buildings from 1980 through 2000. In 2000, Congress passed the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act (NHLPA), which was intended to smooth the process of transferring lighthouses from the federal government to private or public hands. In 2003, both OBC and Currituck County applied to get ownership of the lighthouse under the NHLPA. The Department of Interior granted the lighthouse to OBC. But following that ruling, Currituck County claimed that OBC was in violation of local ordinances by providing insufficient parking and restrooms onsite. In January 2006, a federal judge ruled that Currituck County wanted to pursue the fight over the shared parking lot and restrooms, they would have to sue the federal government as well. Currituck County commissioners did just that, continuing the lawsuit until April 2006 when the suit was dropped and the two parties reached a settlement agreement.

"The parties agree it is in the best interests of the parties and general public that all issues as to the jurisdiction of the County over the [lighthouse] be forever put to rest and that the parties work together for the benefit of the public," the settlement agreement reads.

Needless to say, everyone at Outer Banks Conservationists was much relieved to reach an agreement and all were ready to move forward.

Now that the lawsuit is behind them, Outer Banks Conservationists can look to the future. About 80,000 people a year visit the lighthouse, and all of the visitation revenue goes back into maintaining the lighthouse, operating the historic site and other conservation and historic preservation projects.

## PRESERVATION CONSULTATION

A national organization known as Heritage Preservation has chosen the Currituck Beach Lighthouse as a participant in its 2006 Conservation Assessment Program (CAP). This grant program assists museums and historic sites in their preservation and conservation efforts by funding professional consultations with preservation and conservation specialists. In early October, professional conservators spent two days at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse, identifying the conservation needs of the lighthouse's collections and historic buildings. The conservators' follow-up reports will identify the conservation priorities at the site and will allow the lighthouse staff to evaluate its current collections-care policies, procedures and environmental conditions.

## CEREMONIES AND HONORS

Congratulations: The Outer Banks Lighthouse Society honored Currituck Beach Lighthouse Keeper Luis Garcia and Site Manager Meghan Agresto with the Currituck Beach Lighthouse Award. "Although you may feel you are just doing your job as keepers, we feel that you have gone beyond the call of duty to keep Currituck Beach Lighthouse and its maritime history alive," said Bett Padgett, President of the Outer Banks Lighthouse Society. "We are pleased to honor you as recipients of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse Award this year for all the hard work you have done for this light." Agresto and Garcia have worked at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse since May 2005.

## LIGHTHOUSE OWNERSHIP PROCESS

### A TIMELINE

- 1875**  
Currituck Beach Lighthouse is built by the U.S. Light-House Board.
- 1939 –**  
U.S. Coast Guard takes over lighthouse and automates the light. Residences are abandoned.
- 1969**  
Site is overgrown and in complete disrepair. John Wilson, the 17-year-old great grandson of former keeper Homer T. Austin, visits the site for the first time.
- 1980-1990**  
OBC does major restoration of the double keepers' quarters and grounds.
- 1991-present**  
Visitation fees fund major restorations of lighthouse, little keeper's house and outbuildings.
- 1999 –**  
U.S. Coast Guard gives OBC a 20-year lease to the lighthouse in exchange for its restoration. OBC opens the tower to the public for the first time.
- 2000**  
Congress enacts National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act, which allows the government to convey lighthouses from the USCG to non-profits or other entities.
- July 2003**  
Federal government awards lighthouse to Outer Banks Conservationists.
- Mar. 2005**  
Currituck County files suit in Currituck Superior Court claiming that the lighthouse does not comply with local ordinances.
- April 2006**  
Currituck County gives up lawsuit and both sides reach an agreement.
- Feb. 2003 –**  
Both Currituck County and OBC apply for ownership of the lighthouse.
- Oct. 2003 –**  
Lighthouse deed transfers to OBC.
- Jan. 2006 –**  
U.S. District Judge Terrence Boyle rules that the federal government retains an interest in the lighthouse and that it is, therefore, immune from county zoning ordinances. Currituck County amends its lawsuit to include the U.S. government.



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!