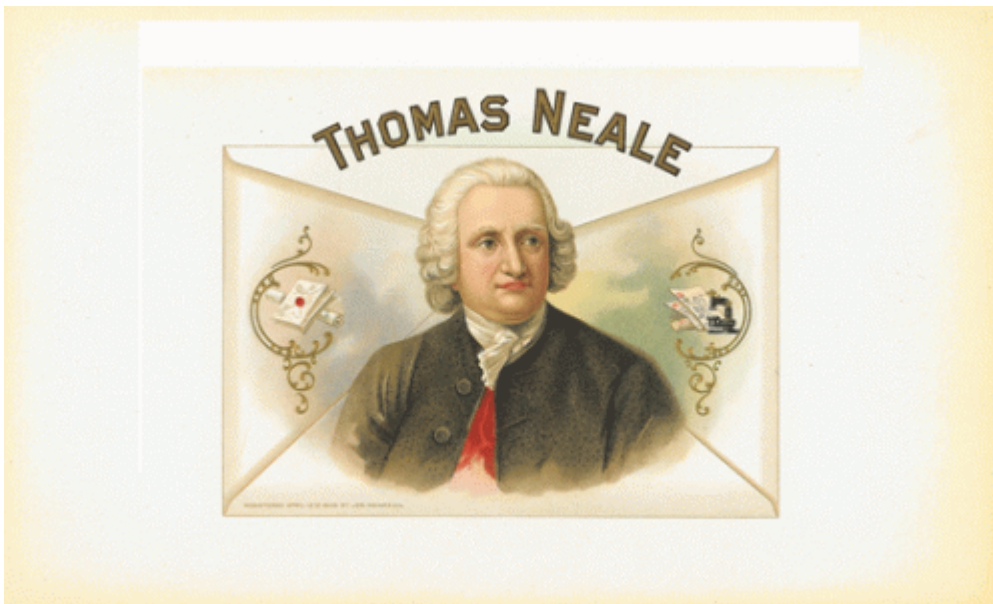


Early History of Mail Delivery in the North American Colonies

During the seventeenth century, colonists in North America mostly relied on private connections (ship captains, merchants, and friends) to convey written messages. Eventually the governments of Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania established local and regional mail services, with taverns and coffee houses serving as mail stations. Southern colonies employed slaves to carry letters and packages between plantations.

The first attempt to establish a centralized postal service on the North American continent occurred on February 17, 1691. On that date William and Mary, joint monarchs of England, Scotland, and Ireland, authorized Thomas Neale, influential English citizen, “to erect, settle, and establish within the chief parts of their majesties’ colonies and plantations in America, an office or offices for receiving and dispatching letters and pacquets, and to receive, send, and deliver the same under such rates and sums of money as the planters shall agree to give, and to hold and enjoy the same for the term of twenty-one years.”

Thomas Neale:



Thomas Neale paid six shillings, eight pence a year for the privilege of acting as the equivalent of Postmaster General, but he never visited America. Instead, he appointed Andrew Hamilton, a Scot, and fourth colonial Governor of New Jersey, as his deputy. Hamilton and another Englishman, Robert West, assumed the franchise before Neale died in 1699.

Andrew Hamilton died in 1703. Four years later the British government purchased the rights to the North American postal system, and John Hamilton, Andrew's son, was appointed Deputy Postmaster General. John Lloyd of Charleston, South Carolina succeeded him in 1721.

In 1730 former Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood, became Deputy Postmaster General of America. He served until 1739. It was Governor Spotswood who, in 1718, sent Lt. Robert Maynard of the British Royal Navy to Ocracoke where he and his sailors confronted and killed Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard the pirate.

In 1737 Spotswood appointed thirty-one year old Benjamin Franklin Postmaster of Philadelphia.

When the Second Continental Congress convened in 1775 it appointed Franklin as the first Postmaster General of the de- facto national government which soon became the United States. In the early days of the Postal Service communications mostly consisted of correspondence between Congress and army commanders. Delegates considered the reliable conveyance of letters and intelligence essential to the cause of liberty and the defense of the colonies.

The founding fathers thought the establishment of a national postal service sufficiently important that they included a "Postal Clause" in the United States Constitution: "The Congress shall have Power...To establish Post Offices and post Roads [Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution of the United States]." Service was soon expanded to connect major cities with each other, and with emerging frontier towns.

Rural areas continued to rely on friends and acquaintances to deliver letters. Outer Bankers generally entrusted their correspondence to masters of schooners. Delivery, if completed, could take months, or even years.

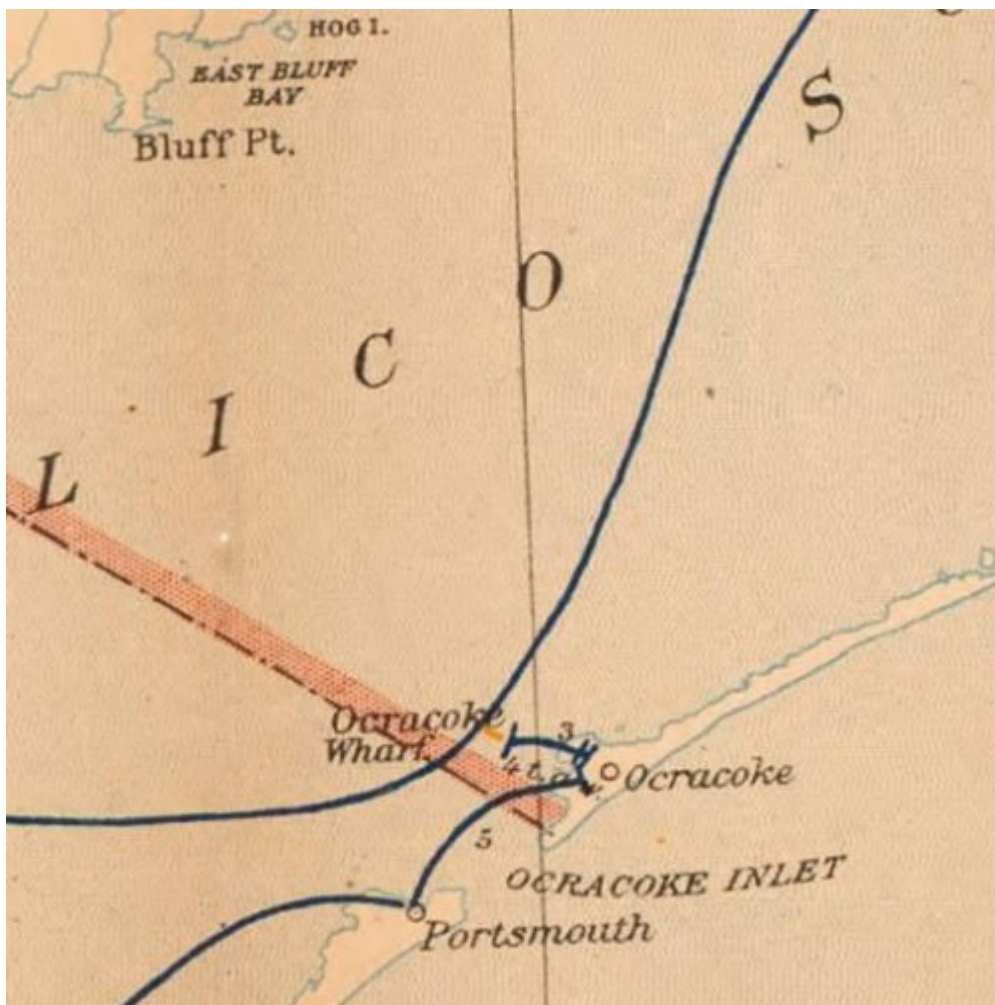
The Establishment of a US Post Office in Ocracoke Village

It was not until August 21, 1840 that a post office was established on Ocracoke Island. This was the first Post Office on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Twenty-eight year old William Hatton Howard, great-grandson of Ocracoke's last colonial owner, William Howard, Sr., was appointed Ocracoke's first postmaster. For the next sixty years the post office was located in successive postmasters' homes or in one of the village's general stores.

In spite of federal oversight of mail delivery, service on isolated Ocracoke Island was often

unreliable throughout most of the nineteenth century. As late as 1899 mail was brought to the island at most three times per week. The route started at Marshallberg, North Carolina (near Beaufort), then traveled through the coastal towns of Davis, Wit, Atlantic, Lupton, and Portsmouth before ending at Ocracoke. Mail was then sent three miles to Shell Castle Island in Pamlico Sound.

Post Route Map (detail), 1899:



Mail was carried on sailing vessels, typically sloops or “bugeyes,” (two masted schooners with raked masts, a covered deck, and a small cabin aft of the main mast). Many factors served to delay mail in the nineteenth century, not the least of which was weather. Storms, hurricanes, fog, and ice, as well as human error contributed to delays.

The Civil War also disrupted mail delivery in North Carolina. After John Reagan, newly

appointed Postmaster General of the Confederate States of America assumed his position in the spring of 1861 the US Postmaster General, Montgomery Blair, ordered the cessation of all United States mail service to the Confederacy.

Northern invasions of the Outer Banks and Union blockades of coastal ports caused additional problems. Furthermore, financial difficulties resulted in Reagan instituting salary cuts, personnel layoffs, and postage rate increases.

Islander Daniel Tolson, merchant and slave owner, had been appointed Ocracoke postmaster July 03, 1855 at a salary of \$9.17 per week. Nothing is known of the fate of the island post office during the war. However, economic and commercial recovery for the South was only gradual after Lee's surrender in 1865.

On June 6, 1866 Abner Bennett Howard was appointed Postmaster. For unknown reasons the Ocracoke post office was discontinued on April 02, 1868, and not reestablished until November 22, 1869. Abner Bennett operated the post office in his store, an unpainted structure built in the late 1700s by his great-grandfather.

The beginning of the twentieth century ushered in a new era for post offices on the Outer Banks.

Mailboats

Sometime in the very early twentieth century the Beaufort, Morehead City & Ocracoke Steamship Company was incorporated. This company provided a connection with the Norfolk and Southern Railway at Beaufort, North Carolina.

According to Jack Dudley in his book Ocracoke Album, "postal records indicate the mail service from Beaufort to Ocracoke was designated as a railway post office from 1900 to about 1934."

Dudley continues with this observation: "Initially the delivery route was a roundtrip of 85 miles, made once per week. The boat left Beaufort, Monday, 6:00 a.m. and arrived at Pilot Town [Ocracoke] Wednesday, 6:00 p.m. It departed from Pilot Town on Thursday, 6:00 a.m. and arrived in Beaufort, Saturday, 6:00 p.m."

On October 21, 1902 Thomas Wallace ("Mr. Tommy") Howard was appointed postmaster at Ocracoke. He held the position for nearly 40 years, until he retired in 1941. Soon after his appointment Mr. Tommy built a small building close to his home (near where the Silver Lake Motel is located today), the first of Ocracoke's four dedicated post office buildings.

Although Dudley lists six mailboats that served Ocracoke during that period (the *Kitty Watts*, the *Ripple*, the *Meteor*, the *Hero*, the *Viola*, and the *Lillian*) Ocracokers remember only the *Morehead City* and the *Ocracoke*. According to retired Ocracoke postmaster Elizabeth O'Neal Howard, as quoted in Alton Ballance's book Ocracokers, "the first mailboat service was ...runned by two men called Mr. Gus and Mr. Pinter.... They had two boats. One would leave Morehead City early in the morning and the other would leave from Ocracoke at the same time." The round trip took two days.

Mail was also carried back and forth between Hatteras and Ocracoke. Elizabeth Howard remembered that her father-in-law, Mr. Tommy, would pole a skiff thirty miles to Avon once a week to pick up mail and passengers.

In the winter of 1917 Pamlico Sound froze over, trapping the mailboat near Portsmouth Island. Unable to move his vessel for fear of sinking, the captain simply walked across the ice to Portsmouth village.

Before Ocracoke's harbor was dredged, mailboats from the mainland docked at various piers along Pamlico Sound, for a time at the old Pamlico Inn, and later at a long, narrow dock to the north of the "ditch." In the late 1920s Mr. Frank Jackson would bring his shallow draft skiff to the mailboat, then transfer the mail to Doctor Angle's dock (just south of present day Captain's Landing hotel).

Pamlico Inn & Dock:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

In 1928, three years after a hard surface road was built from Beaufort to Atlantic, the Postal

Service began carrying mail to Atlantic by truck. From then on only one mailboat made a daily round trip between Ocracoke and Atlantic. William Godwin ("Will") Willis, a native of Smyrna, North Carolina who was married to Malsey Wahab from Ocracoke, was the captain of this boat.

Cockle Creek was partially dredged in 1931 (and renamed Silver Lake harbor). Soon afterward Captain Will built a small general store on the end of his dock (the store now houses the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Exhibit). During Capt. Will's tenure the mailboat tied up at his dock.

On October 12, 1937, Postmaster Thomas Wallace Howard had the honor of sending the first airmail to, among other places, Kitty Hawk, NC, the birthplace of aviation.

First Airmail to Kitty Hawk, NC (from Ocracoke):



My grandfather, Homer Howard, mailed a letter to my father on that day.



The imprint on the envelope reads:

"FIRST ALL NORTH CAROLINA AIR MAIL FLIGHTS
OCT. 11-16, 1937
Wright Memorial, Kitty Hawk, NC
Ocracoke, "The Fisherman's Paradise"

Some years later there were attempts made to establish postal air service to and from Ocracoke, but those efforts never reached fruition.

In 1938 Wilbur Nelson obtained the mail contract. His boat was the beloved 42 foot *Aleta*, powered by a 40 horsepower diesel engine. Built in Atlantic, North Carolina in 1923 by Ambrose Fulcher, the *Aleta* was originally owned by Howard Nelson who named her for his

sister. He used the *Aleta* to carry mail between Morehead City and Atlantic until 1928, after which time the boat was sold and put into service as a rum runner. During Prohibition the *Aleta* was seized by federal agents and sold to Dee Mason of Atlantic.

The *Aleta* and other “mailboats” were variations of the shad boat, a type of vessel first built by George Washington Creef on Roanoke Island in the late 1800s.

The shad boat (a sailboat with a single mast and sprit sail, wide beam, round stern, and graceful lines) evolved from dugout log boats. It was ideally suited for fishing in rough water near inlets and in Pamlico Sound. The shad boat was easily adapted for carrying mail and passengers by converting it to a power boat and adding a spacious cabin. The “mailboat” was also well suited for transporting concealed illegal spirits.

Wilbur Nelson purchased the *Aleta* in 1938. For six years he carried mail, freight, ice, and passengers between Ocracoke and Atlantic on this iconic vessel.

When Mr. Tommy retired in 1941 his future daughter-in-law, Elizabeth O’Neal, was appointed Ocracoke’s postmaster.

Elizabeth moved her operation across the sandy footpath from Mr. Tommy’s small post office building to the old store where Abner Bennett Howard had been postmaster. The store had changed hands several times, but 125 of the original post office boxes were still installed. For a while the store had been owned by postmaster Michael Lawrence Piland (appointed February 28, 1888), then by Suskin and Berry (a North Carolina wholesale dry goods and notion house, founded by L. B. Suskin in 1888 and incorporated in 1902), and finally, by Isaac Willis (“Big Ike”) O’Neal, Elizabeth’s father.

The Old Store and Post Office:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

In 1945 Elmo Fulcher and George O'Neal purchased the *Aleta*. Capt. Elmo and Capt. George ran the mail for another eight years. The harbor had been dredged a second time in 1938, then again during WWII. By 1945 a dock had been built at the post office, where the *Aleta* now tied up.

Six days a week, at 6:15 a.m., the *Aleta* left Ocracoke, and arrived in Atlantic between 9:00 and 9:30. She departed Atlantic at 1 o'clock, stopped abreast of Portsmouth to transfer mail to and from Henry Pigott's skiff, and arrived back home about 4:30.

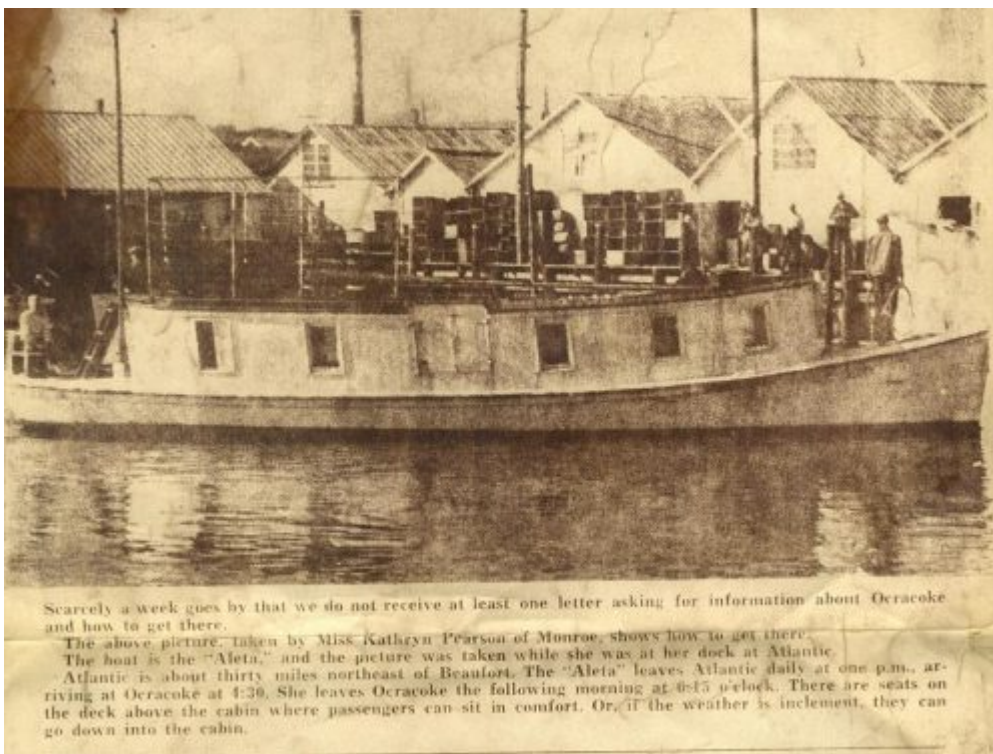
Capt. Elmo's daughter, Ellen Marie, tells a wonderful story about her father on her web site (<http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/c/l/o/Elle-F-Cloud/FILE/0015page.html>):

"Capt. Elmo was known for his knowledge of the local waters. He needed only the stars or a pocket watch and a compass to navigate the sounds of eastern North Carolina. George Jackson tells about a day that he ran on the mail boat with my father, when the fog was so thick they couldn't see the bow of the boat. He will be quick to remind you that the trip from here to Cedar Island is a pretty straight stretch, but when you enter Core Sound and head for Atlantic, NC there is a lot of turning and winding. He tells how Capt. Elmo used his

pocket watch to time his distance from one marker to another and using his compass to set his course for the next marker, blowing the fog horn to warn other boaters of their location. George goes on to tell how he heard the Captain back down on the engine, while giving the boat a turn to the left and idle the engine. He asked Capt. Elmo what was going on and why had he stopped the boat. The reply was, "Well George, we're here, we're at the dock in Atlantic." George stuck his head out of the window, and could see nothing, but he could hear a car running and people talking on the dock."

The afternoon arrival of the *Aleta* was the major social event of the day in the 1940s and early 1950s. The entire village, it seemed, gathered at the dock to hail the *Aleta* as she motored through the ditch and eased up to the dock. The excitement was palpable as villagers gathered to wait for their mail.

The *Aleta* Docked at Atlantic, NC:



[The caption on the photo above reads, "Scarcely a week goes by that we do not receive at least one letter asking for information about Ocracoke and how to get there. The above picture, taken by Miss Kathryn Pearson of Monroe, shows how to get there. The boat is the 'Aleta,' and the picture was taken while she was at her dock at Atlantic. Atlantic is about thirty miles northeast of Beaufort. The 'Aleta' leaves Atlantic daily at one p.m., arriving at Ocracoke at 4:30. She leaves Ocracoke the following morning at 6:15 o'clock. There are seats on the deck above the cabin where passengers can sit in comfort. Or, if the weather is inclement, they can go down into the cabin.

Ocracoke at 4:30. She leaves Ocracoke the following morning at 6:15 o'clock. There are seats on the deck above the cabin where passengers can sit in comfort. Or, if the weather is inclement, they can go down into the cabin.”]

Men in slouch hats with half-smoked cigars dangling from their mouths discussed fishing, and traded jokes. Old women in sun bonnets and aprons shared news and gossip with young mothers keeping watch on their young-uns. Barefooted teenagers, their dungarees rolled above their ankles, stood on the dock, ready to carry the heavy canvas mail bags from the boat to the post office. Stories were shared, as was news of relatives and friends. Everyone was curious to see which islanders had returned home, and how many strangers were coming to the island. Laughter and smiles filled the air.

The villagers, of course, had also come to retrieve their mail. After the mail bags had been carried down the dock and deposited inside the Post Office Elizabeth Howard and her assistants sorted the letters and packages (many of them from Sears & Roebuck, and other mail order houses). When they were finished they stepped outside to greet their neighbors and distribute (or “call over”) the mail.

The *Aleta* Docked at Will Willis' Store:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Villagers Gather to Meet the Mailboat:



A few years prior to WWII Stanley Wahab obtained a separate contract to carry mail between Hatteras and Ocracoke. There was no paved road and no ferry across the inlet. Stanley hired Walter O'Neal and his son, Van Henry O'Neal, to transport mail and passengers in their four-wheel-drive paneled station wagon. It was not unusual for passengers to be asked to get out and push when the truck got stuck in soft sand. Mr. Walter kept a boat on Ocracoke at the old Hatteras Inlet Coast Guard Station. Many islanders took advantage of this service to see family or friends on Hatteras, and to visit Dr. Crankshaw, the only physician nearby.

After Van Henry enlisted in the armed forces his brother, Ansley O'Neal, continued this service. Later, Charles McWilliams ("Charlie Mac") took over. Charlie Mac, decoy carver and cigar smoker, was a colorful island character who is remembered fondly by everyone who knew him. He drove a surplus WWII Dodge Power Wagon the length of Ocracoke Island six days a week. When the tide was low he drove on the hard-packed beach. During high tides the old Dodge rumbled along in low gear for an hour or more in a deeply rutted

soft sand road.

Charlie Mac Drives onto the Ferry:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

World War II and its aftermath brought many changes to Ocracoke. German U-Boat activity off shore prompted the US Navy to build a sizable base on Ocracoke in 1942. Official Navy and Coast Guard mail, as well as letters and packages from military personnel and their families, strained Ocracoke's small town postmaster to her limits.

The Navy built the first hard surface road on Ocracoke. In about 1950 the state began paving more roads in the village, beginning near the Community Store and continuing just past the present day Thurston House, and down to the lighthouse. In 1950 Hatteras native, Frazier Peele, initiated private ferry service across Hatteras Inlet. Frazier Peele had no dock at Ocracoke. At times Charlie Mac and other passengers were forced to drive their vehicles through salt water to reach the shore. The state of North Carolina built a paved road from the village to the inlet (now designated NC Hwy 12) in 1957, and took over operation of Peele's ferry service the same year.

Charlie Mac Returning to Ocracoke:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Elmo Fulcher and George O'Neal lost their mail contract in 1952. Capt. Elmo bought Capt. George's interest in the *Aleta*, and converted her to a shrimp boat.

Ansley O'Neal, captain of the *Dolphin*, secured the mail contract in 1952, ensuring that a mailboat continued to run from the mainland to Ocracoke for a few more years, even though much of the mail was now arriving from Hatteras. This continued until 1964 when the postal service finally decided that an Ocracoke mailboat was no longer required. Henceforth all US mail has been trucked to Ocracoke from the north.

Capt. Ansley O'Neal on the *Dolphin*:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Meanwhile, the old store and post office had been severely damaged in the 1944 hurricane.

The Old Store & Post Office after the 1944 Storm:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

In 1952 postmaster Elizabeth O'Neal Howard, and her husband Wahab Howard, had a new, dedicated, 18' X 24', 432 square foot post office built on their property near the old store. The new post office had 150 lock boxes. It was located where David O'Neal's Down Point Decoy Shop is today.

The 1952 Post Office:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Twelve years later the Post Office Department determined that the building was obsolete, remarking that it had “No toilet nor water, no rear platform no parking and maneuvering. Old building with wood floors, poor lighting, wood slab ceiling, obsolete equipment, poor security, no bars nor windows.”

A new building was authorized. On December 22, 1964 the official report of the Postal Inspector, P.G. Osgood, noted the following:

“As indicated in my previous report, improved access to the outer banks has increased the tourist traffic to Ocracoke and the area in general. Approximately 1 year ago a new bridge was built over Oregon Inlet and with additional ferry service now provided between Ocracoke Island and Hatteras, a large number of people come to the island. Since the report of January 11, 1964, the ferry service from Ocracoke south has been improved. The ferry boat service has been changed to operate between Ocracoke and Cedar Island, N.C., rather than Ocracoke and Atlantic, N.C. The change has reduced the time required for the trips from 4 hours to 2 ½ hours, thus permitting two trips per day, which has doubled the capacity of passengers.”

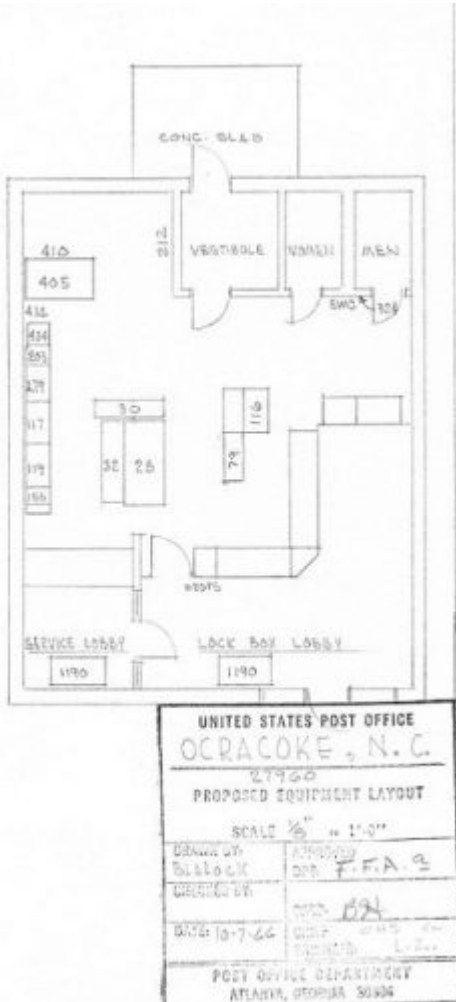
In 1966-1967 a new, 28' X 38' brick post office with 1000 square feet of interior space and 464 lock boxes was constructed nearby. More than twice the size of the 1952 building, it included a service lobby, a lock box lobby, work area, two bathrooms, and a concrete slab adjacent to the rear door. A small paved parking area connected the post office with NC Hwy 12.

The 1967 Post Office:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Floor Plan of the 1966 Post Office:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Before the post office was completed a minor change was made. To better accommodate the mail truck, the concrete slab, door, vestibule, and bathrooms were put on the left hand side of the building, not in the rear. Soon after the construction of the new post office the 1952 building was moved several hundred feet west, close to the shore of Silver Lake. It was converted to a gift shop, and later became a candy store.

Thirty years after the construction of the brick post office traffic to Ocracoke had increased even more than Postal Inspector Osgood could have imagined. As a result, the small parking lot and streams of cars, trucks, bicycles, and pedestrians on Highway 12 (especially heavy immediately after a Cedar Island or Swan Quarter ferry arrived), caused delays, confusion, and frustration.

A decision was made to move the post office to a more spacious, recently vacated building on the southeast edge of the village. The larger parking area made the new location particularly attractive.

In 2001 Elizabeth Howard's daughter, Betty Helen, and her husband, George, built a modern hotel, Captain's Landing, on their property where Abner Bennett's old store and post office once stood. At the same time the 1952 post office building was remodeled as a rental cottage, and the 1966 brick post office was converted to a motel office and gift shop.

Captain's Cottage (the 1952 PO Building) at Captain's Landing Hotel:



(Photo courtesy Captain's Landing Hotel.)

Weather continues to influence life and activity on Ocracoke Island. In 2003 a tornado spun through the village, destroying one rental house, tearing the roof off another, and uprooting trees in its path. The new post office building was not spared. A portion of the roof was ripped off, and an outer wall was pulled loose from the rafters. But islanders are resilient. A decision was made to create a temporary post office in the sheriff's office. For several weeks residents visited the jail to pick up their mail.

Today, the 3,000 square foot Ocracoke Post Office building, with 1256 lock boxes (820 of which are rented), serves nearly 1000 year around residents and businesses as well as numerous summer visitors. To this day Ocracoke has no mail carriers or home delivery. That suits islanders just fine. The post office continues to be a center for community activity and information.

Ocracoke Post Office, 2013:



The bulletin board is always filled with wedding or birth announcements, notices of yard sales, information about county commissioners meetings, newspaper articles of local interest, requests for rental housing, household items for sale, etc. The post office is also the place where much day-to-day island business takes place. News is exchanged, meetings are arranged, information is passed on, and humorous stories are shared.

No mailboat has docked in Silver Lake harbor for almost half a century, but when weather conditions cause delays in mail delivery O'cockers still ask the postmaster that age old island question, "When will the mail be called over?"

Following is a list of everyone who has served as postmaster at Ocracoke (name, title, and date appointed):

William H. Howard Postmaster 08/21/1840

Robert Williams Postmaster 10/14/1843

Wallace H. Styron Postmaster 04/17/1844

George W. Styron Postmaster 02/06/1845

William Woodard Postmaster 12/16/1845

William H. Howard Postmaster 03/31/1846

John Pike Postmaster 12/31/1846

William Howard Jr. Postmaster 02/11/1847 (although he was appointed, there is some question about whether he served or not)

William H. Howard Postmaster 03/08/1847

Daniel Tolson Postmaster 07/03/1855

Abner B. Howard Postmaster 06/06/1866

(The Ocracoke post office was discontinued on April 2, 1868, and reestablished on November 22, 1869)

Abner B. Howard Postmaster 11/22/1869

Sidney E. Howard Postmaster 01/24/1873

Mrs. Sidney E. Tolson Postmaster 03/25/1875 (Sidney E. Howard - name changed to Mrs. Sidney E. Tolson by

marriage on March 25, 1875.)

Edward Farrow Postmaster 05/20/1875

James S. McWilliams Postmaster 07/10/1877

Michael L. Piland Postmaster 02/28/1888

Edward Farrow Postmaster 01/11/1897

William E. Howard Postmaster 08/28/1900

Thomas W. Howard Postmaster 10/21/1902

Miss Elizabeth A. O'Neal Acting Postmaster 04/30/1941

Miss Elizabeth A. O'Neal Postmaster 11/12/1941 (Elizabeth O'Neal - name changed to Mrs. Elizabeth O. Howard by marriage on 8/17/42.

William A. Sexton Jr. Officer-In-Charge 03/23/1972

Louis W. Whitman Officer-In-Charge 11/14/1972

Charles R. Bulla Officer-In-Charge 02/09/1973

Charles R. Bulla Postmaster 06/02/1973

James R. Littleton Officer-In-Charge 09/02/1975

Mrs. Selina B. Goodwin Officer-In-Charge 09/12/1975

Howard S. Tolson Officer-In-Charge 03/15/1976

Mrs. Selina B. Goodwin Officer-In-Charge 11/22/1976

Junior W. Hill Postmaster 05/21/1977

Mrs. Anita F. Fletcher Officer-In-Charge 02/09/1979

Mrs. Anita F. Fletcher Postmaster 05/19/1979

Deborah B. Burrus Officer-In-Charge 06/24/1993

Ruth G. Jordan Postmaster 12/11/1993

Celeste Brooks Postmaster 4/2/2006