

Long before the electrification of villages on the Outer Banks, islanders built small screened "houses" that they mounted on posts in their yards. Called cool houses, milk houses, or screen houses, they were designed to protect food from spoiling, for at least a day or two. Although pie safes, root cellars, and spring houses served the same purpose in other communities, the small, elevated and screened outdoor "cool house" seems to be unique to coastal North Carolina.

In 1925, Ocracoke native and respected hunting and fishing guide, Mr. Stacy Wilson Howard (1885-1968), built a cool house which he installed in his yard on Howard Street.



Stacy Wilson Howard

Some years later it was rebuilt by Stacy's son-in-law, Guthrie Jolliff. It fell into disrepair in the 1970s and lay neglected for a number of years.



Mr. Stacy's Cool House, 2018

After Mr. Stacy's daughter, Blanche Howard Jolliff (b. 1919), died in 2018 Philip Howard acquired the cool house and repaired it.

In conversation with Ms. Blanche in 2014 she described the cool house this way: "If you're going to kill you a chicken on Saturday, you put them in this box to keep them cool till Sunday. It was to keep food cool so it couldn't spoil. Mama used to keep her salt pork in it on the bottom shelf. A lot of people had them. They made them themselves." Fish, vegetables, fruits and pies are among several other items typically stored in a cool house.

A sign on nearby Portsmouth Island describes the preserved cool house pictured below as a Portsmouth "refrigerator." "A cool breeze and the protection from the sun of this 'house' were relied on to keep perishable items fresh."



Portsmouth Island Cool House

In 2019 Philip Howard repaired Mr. Stacy's cool house.



Repairing the Cool House

Today the Cool House has been repurposed as a Little Free Library. The Cool House/Free Library is located in the front yard of Village Craftsmen, Ocracoke Island's award-winning craft gallery on historic Howard Street, not far from Mr. Stacy's homeplace.





Mr. Stacy's Cool House/Library

Screens cover the windows and door of the cool house, as they did originally, which were designed to keep flies and other critters from getting to the food. Additional glass panes have now been installed to protect the books from inclement weather. Otherwise, no changes have been made to the design of the cool house.

Mr. Stacy's Cool House is a public book exchange. Stop by anytime to take a book to read or to leave one for someone else to find.

We like to think that Mr. Stacy, who was an avid reader, would be pleased to see his cool house used today to promote reading.