

This story is an edited version that was originally published in the book, *Digging up Uncle Evans*, by Philip Howard, © 2008.

I didn't recognize the woman right away, although she had been on my Ghost and History Tour the summer before. She and almost two dozen other people were with me on that July evening. We stopped at the Island Inn, as we always do. This is the building that had originally been built as Ocracoke's Odd Fellows Lodge and Schoolhouse.

The Island Inn, now more than one hundred years old, is host to one of the island's most active ghosts, and I was sharing details. Standing in the parking lot just after dusk I recounted the basic history of the structure and then told the gruesome tale of Mrs. Godfrey's murder.

Most people recoil at the telling.



The Island Inn ca. 2017

The story is not complete without sharing the sightings and strange happenings experienced by employees and guests alike.

I had not quite finished my tale when the woman felt compelled to tell her story. Some years before, she had rented a room at the Inn. After a day of exploring the island she returned to the hotel lobby and climbed the antique stairway to her second floor accommodations.

At the entrance to her room she retrieved the key from her purse and slowly opened the door. It was quiet inside. A delicate breeze wafted through the open window and gently

rustled the lace curtains. She was exhausted. The old iron bed, piled high with soft pillows and a cozy quilt beckoned to her. But she could not sleep yet. Her mind raced with images of sailors, pirates, and simple island folks who had called Ocracoke home for generations. What was it like, she wondered, to live here, so far from conventional civilization? Who had built this fine hotel, and what stories did it hold?

Finally, too tired to think any more, she prepared for bed, and turned in about an hour before midnight. Several hours later, aroused from a deep sleep, she had the distinct sensation that someone was holding on to her big toe. She forced herself awake, afraid at first to open her eyes, fearful of what she might see.

With trepidation she lifted her head slowly and opened her eyes. Instantly the sensation vanished. No one was standing at the foot of her bed, and no hand grasped her toe. The curtains were still.

Convinced it had merely been a disquieting dream, she drifted back to sleep, only to be awakened a second time with the identical sensation. Again, no person, no figure, presented itself. And the pressure on her toe disappeared the moment she opened her eyes.

After the third encounter with whatever was holding on to her toe the woman propped herself on her pillows and determined to stay awake until daybreak. In the morning she requested to be moved to one of the newer rooms in the building on the other side of the street. After hearing the stories of Mrs. Godfrey, she said, she now knew who had been tormenting her that night.

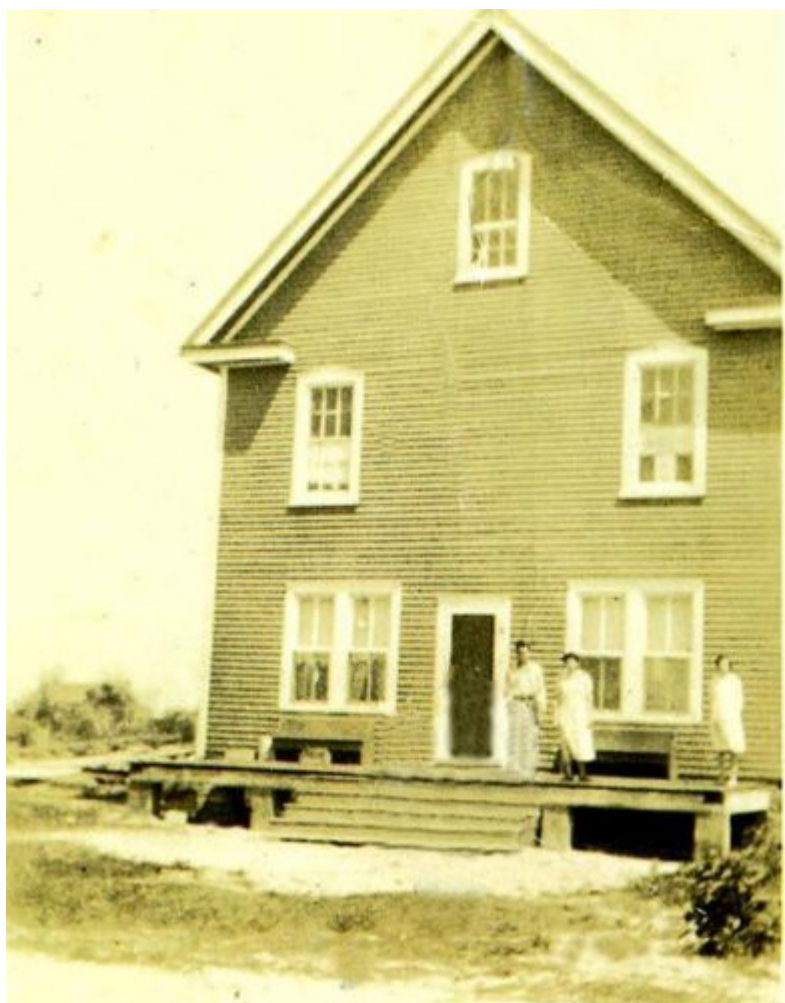
The center section of what is now the Island Inn was built by Mr. Charlie Scarborough in 1900/1901 as a meeting house for Ocracoke Lodge #194, Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

The ground floor of the Lodge housed the island's first community school.



Odd Fellows Lodge, ca. 1901

Following the death of Michael Lawrence Piland, a Gates County native who many believe introduced the Odd Fellows to Ocracoke, the fraternal organization was disbanded. The Lodge was sold and converted to a private residence.



Home of Ben O'Neal, ca. 1925

In 1940 the building was sold again, this time to Robert Stanley Wahab, native islander and early entrepreneur. Immediately the first floor was converted into a coffee shop with soda fountain and ice cream bar. Rooms upstairs became a boarding house. Later, during the war, the second floor was converted again, this time to an exclusive club for Navy Officers. It was dubbed the "Crow's Nest."



Wahab Coffee Shop

After the war a number of improvements and additions were made to the building. Several former Navy barracks were moved and attached to the southwest side of the building. A sizeable northeast wing was added in the 1950s that included a dining hall and more guest quarters. Newly christened the Silver Lake Inn, the former Lodge was now a modern hotel. In addition to guest rooms and a dining facility, the Inn also included a dance hall. Local musicians gathered there on Saturday nights to play for the traditional Ocracoke square dances. The Silver Lake Inn had become a prominent landmark and social center for residents and visitors alike.

The Inn was sold in the 1960s and the name changed to the Island Inn. There is no longer a dance hall associated with the Inn, but the present owners continue to serve the traveling public with comfortable rooms, private baths, and even a swimming pool.

As an added benefit, present day guests at the Island Inn, especially those who occupy rooms on the upper floors of the older section of the building, are sometimes confronted by the ghost of Mrs. Godfrey, a former resident.

During the war Stanley Wahab hired a couple from the mainland to act as managers for his

growing hotel. They took an apartment in the hotel. Although capable employees, they soon became well known on the island for their domestic squabbles. Islanders remember them "fighting like cats and dogs." It became an embarrassment to many Ocracokers, who seldom allowed their private lives to be displayed so publicly.

In those days all of the roads on Ocracoke were primitive sandy lanes. Ocracoke's primary link to the mainland was by mail boat. The forty-two foot *Aleta* could carry several dozen passengers — a few in her cabin, others on benches under a protective canvas awning, and more on wooden fish boxes or suitcases arranged on the open deck. She made one round-trip daily between Ocracoke Island and the mainland port of Atlantic, North Carolina.

The mail boat left the island soon after daybreak and arrived at the dock in Atlantic about 10:30 a.m. The *Aleta* laid over long enough to load mail, passengers, and supplies. Shortly after noon she made her way back east across Pamlico Sound.

At that time the main social event of the day on Ocracoke was greeting the mail boat when it glided up to the dock about 4:30 p.m. It seemed as if the entire village was there waiting for the mail, wondering who was coming home for a visit, and curious to see if any strangers were aboard. Old ladies in slat bonnets, carrying baskets filled with groceries from the general store or vegetables from their gardens, waited alongside old men in slouch hats smoking cigars or chewing tobacco.

The atmosphere was congenial and jovial as adults shared the day's news and gossip. Teenage boys in bare feet, white t-shirts, and dungarees rolled up to their calves greeted the mail boat and eagerly hefted large canvas bags of mail over their shoulders and carried them down the dock to the waiting postmaster. Younger children squealed and ran about or entertained themselves chucking oyster shells into the harbor. Eventually the mail would be "called over" and everyone would return to their homes for supper.



Mailboat Aleta

One morning the manager's wife boarded the *Aleta* for a trip across the sound to visit family and friends. Several days later, at the time of her scheduled return, she was conspicuously absent among the passengers disembarking from the mail boat when it arrived back home at Ocracoke. The manager seemed perplexed, but not overly concerned. No doubt his wife had decided to spend several more days with family and friends on the mainland, he thought. She would be home soon enough. In the meanwhile his life was calmer and more peaceful.

A week later, to everyone's horror, the woman's mutilated body was discovered on the mainland, the victim of a horrible murder. Lying face up in a pool of blood in an abandoned house, her throat had been cut. Although suspicion immediately centered on an unidentified serviceman who had been seen getting into a car with her, her murderer was never determined. Not surprisingly, many islanders wondered whether her husband had had something to do with the murder.

Already a heavy drinker, the manager relied increasingly on alcohol to dull his senses after his wife's funeral. He was never accused of the murder, and he returned to work at the Silver Lake Inn. Evenings and nights in his quarters became increasingly troubled. Almost

immediately he began seeing his wife's ghost wandering the halls of the Inn.

All too often he would awake in the middle of the night to see her standing over his bed, fixing him with an accusing stare. She opened doors, and then abruptly slammed them closed. The stairs creaked and groaned as she made her way from floor to floor. He would enter his room to find his wife's cosmetics, left untouched on the dresser since her demise, now rearranged while he was out.

Eventually the distressed manager could endure no more. He quit his job at the Inn and moved back to the mainland. He never returned to Ocracoke.

Over the years reports have continued to surface of Mrs. Godfrey's ghost regularly patrolling rooms and hallways of the Island Inn. Most sightings have occurred on the second and third floors of the main section. It is not uncommon for guests who have never heard the story to approach the front desk in the morning with strange tales of doors opening and closing, of unfamiliar footsteps padding nearby in the middle of the night, or of bathroom spigots opening by themselves.

Women frequently report going out for dinner or a walk on the beach and returning to find their cosmetics scattered about on the dresser. One woman awoke with a start and was terrified to see a ghostly figure examining her toiletries. The next morning her makeup was gone. She never located it.

A young couple was staying at the Inn a number of years ago before the installation of air conditioning. The August evening was particularly hot and muggy. Not a breath of wind disturbed the heavy night air. Hoping for some relief, the couple stepped onto the balcony and settled into rockers. After a while the husband turned to his wife with a curious look on his face. "Did you just feel something odd?" he asked her. "I did," she replied. "All of a sudden I felt a cold ripple of air passing, not over me, but through me, as if something living, but not really living, had touched my soul." He had felt the same uneasy sensation.

The woman on my ghost tour repeats her story of feeling someone holding on to her big toe. She vows never to stay in the older section of the Inn again. Her voice betrays a lingering dread of unseen forces hovering over her bed. She is content, however, to rent a room in the newer wing, as she does often.

Only a few years ago I asked the current owners of the Island Inn if folks still report strange happenings in the upper floors of the main building.

"Oh, every summer we have at least half a dozen guests come downstairs in the morning and tell us about things they've heard or seen during the night. When we explain to them about the manager's wife they nod and admit they're not surprised."



"But there's more," she continues, clearly animated by her own experiences.

"We have a regular guest here who always brings her guitar. She comes several times a year and just loves staying with us. She claims she gets the best night's sleep in her room on the second floor. After one visit I found a small peg on the floor. It had a round, flattened end, but I didn't recognize what it was, so I threw it away. The next day it was lying on the floor in the hallway. I discarded it again. The third time I found it in the middle of the mirror-stand at the top of the stairs. By then it was beginning to feel creepy. I picked up the peg, carried it downstairs and tossed it into the waste basket.

"The guest called several days later. She had lost one of her guitar pegs, and wondered if we had found it. I explained what had happened and apologized. The peg was gone for good now, I explained.

"Weeks later the guitarist was back, anticipating another relaxing island weekend. Imagine my surprise when she came down to the main desk to thank me for the guitar pin. It was lying on the table in her room!"

"Let me tell you another story," the owner continues.

"One of our guests dropped her glasses just as she stepped out of her room, and onto the outside stairway. She searched ten minutes or more, but could not find her glasses. When she told us what had happened we went to help. The glasses had simply disappeared. Finally we gave up, and she checked out without her glasses.

"Two weeks went by, then one day another guest walked up to the counter with a pair of glasses. She found them lying on the steps, just outside her room. Sure enough, they were the missing glasses."

The ghost in the Island Inn often seems to be kind and nurturing. At least that's what people say. Some even claim that she tucks people in at night, and that is why they sleep so soundly.

She does like to play tricks, though, and has a fascination with jewelry. One woman, staying on the island while going through a difficult divorce, took off her wedding ring before going to court on the mainland. When she returned to the island her ring was gone. She never located it.

Not everyone who stays at the Island Inn encounters the ghost. Some are disappointed when she doesn't make herself known. Even when she does, she seems harmless enough to

those who have felt her presence. If you're curious, you are invited to reserve a room at the Inn. We recommend you ask for room number 23 or 24.

Update: In 2018 the Inn was sold to the Ocracoke Preservation Society. The two wings have been demolished, and plans are underway to restore the historic center section which housed the Odd Fellows Lodge and School. Eventually the building will serve as a community visitors center and house public restrooms. I am sure Mrs. Godfrey's ghost will remain at the Lodge as long as it stands!