

(Remarks delivered by Philip Howard May 18, 2023, at the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the construction of the Ocracoke lighthouse.)

The Ocracoke lighthouse has been keeping watch over our small village for 200 years now.

Today, numerous island businesses and non-profit organizations include pictures of the lighthouse in their brochures and websites. And almost any island store that sells t-shirts will have several designs with depictions of the lighthouse.

But I can assure you that what nearly everyone wants is not just a picture of this iconic beacon...no, nearly everyone yearns for an opportunity to climb to the top of the lighthouse. Unfortunately, the lighthouse is never open to the public for climbing. However, although rare, islanders occasionally have opportunities to climb the lighthouse. One needs only to be lucky enough to be at the right place at the right time.

My first opportunity to climb the lighthouse was in 1952, immediately after the new metal spiral staircase was installed. The Coast Guard chief invited my father to accompany him to the top, and my father took me with him. I was eight years old.

My next opportunity was thirty years later, in 1982, when I was 38 years old. Until today, I have never shared this story with anyone but my immediate family. However, before today's event I researched the statute of limitations for criminal trespass on federal property and decided it is now safe to share the story publicly.

In 1982 Jim Henning was Ocracoke's District Ranger. He and his family lived in the lighthouse keeper's quarters. 28-year-old Jay Robinson was the summertime interpretive ranger. Jay was full of energy and enthusiasm, he immersed himself in the community, and we soon became close friends. That summer Jay secured a lead role in our community musical, *A Tale of Blackbeard*. My teenage son, Stefen, and his friend, Tim Donaldson, were pirates.

One evening after the curtain call, Jay called us over to the side, pulled out a large brass skeleton key from his pocket, and explained that it opened the door to the lighthouse. He said he needed to return it in the morning. With a conspiratorial twinkle in his eye, Jay asked if we would like to climb to the top of the lighthouse. He explained it would have to be late, after Jim Henning and his family were fast asleep. "We could all get into trouble," Jay cautioned, "I am not authorized to let anyone else in. I could even lose my job!"

Nevertheless, we enthusiastically agreed.

We met at midnight, and rode our bikes to the lighthouse. “We have to be very quiet and very careful,” Jay reminded us.



The waning gibbous moon cast eerie shadows across the light station yard. The glow from the lighthouse added to the surreal effect. We crept along the fence to the lighthouse door. Jay cautioned us one more time. “Be really quiet,” he whispered. “Jim Henning and his family are asleep right there in the keeper’s house. We don’t want to wake them. Are we all ready?” We nodded in agreement, Jay unlocked the door, and we stepped inside. It was deathly quiet, incredibly dark, and very spooky.

After steeling ourselves for the adventure, we stepped onto the spiral staircase. Every step echoed off the brick walls as we climbed, adding to the tension. We felt vulnerable whenever we passed one of the windows, but we kept climbing.



Ocracoke Lighthouse Spiral Staircase

The spiral staircase stops about eight feet below the lantern room. From there a sturdy steel ladder continues to a hatch in the lantern room floor. We stopped to calm ourselves. Our hearts were racing in anticipation of entering the lantern room.



Ocracoke Lighthouse Ladder

Jay went first. He climbed the ladder, pushed open the hatch and stuck his head into the lantern room. And that's when pandemonium erupted. There was the greatest screeching, hooting, and flapping of wings as downy feathers floated down around us! [Sound effects and flapping of arms here.] Unbeknownst to us, one of the trapezoidal window panes in the lantern room had fallen out, and a large (and now very agitated) barred owl had made her nest on the floor below the Fresnel lens.

Jay let the hatch down with a thud and retreated down the ladder. We were all spooked and stood there for a split second in shock. Then, without a word amongst us, we raced down the stairs, jumped outside, locked the door behind us, sprinted across the lawn to our bikes, and pedaled away as fast as we could.

We had escaped!

Several days later, as Jay was standing with District Ranger Jim Henning in the light station yard, and being careful not to betray his misadventure or incriminate himself, he looked up and pointed to the top of the lighthouse. "It looks to me like one of the panes in the lantern room might be missing," Jay remarked casually.

"It sure looks like it," Jim replied, "I'll have the maintenance crew investigate."

The maintenance crew were the next people to discover the owl and her two owlets. The birds were left undisturbed until the fall when the owlets fledged; then the nest was removed and the window pane replaced.

Thus ends the tale of my most memorable climb to the top of the Ocracoke lighthouse. Thank you for allowing me to share it.