

Welcome to the latest edition of our Ocracoke Newsletter.

**Portsmouth Island:**

Just across Ocracoke Inlet, to the south, lies Portsmouth Island.

**Path from Haulover Dock on Portsmouth Island:**



As many of you know, Portsmouth village is now abandoned. Established as a town in 1753 by the North Carolina Assembly, Portsmouth was one of the largest settlements on the Outer Banks by 1770. By the mid 1800's residents numbered 685.

**Portsmouth Island Post Office, 1930's:**



**Portsmouth Island Post Office, 2000:**



Because of Ocracoke Inlet's proximity to the northern end of Portsmouth Island and the growth of the nation's shipping industry Portsmouth came to be one of the principal "lightering" villages along the east coast. Here larger, heavily laden ships would transfer their cargo to smaller-draft vessels piloted by islanders to be transported to destinations on the mainland of North Carolina.

Changes were in store for Portsmouth, however. After 1860 several events conspired to strip this island of its lifeblood. A number of residents left Portsmouth during the Civil War as Union forces invaded. Many never returned. Additionally, a hurricane had opened a deeper inlet at Hatteras in 1846 and at about the same time Ocracoke Inlet shifted closer to

Ocracoke.

By the early part of the twentieth century the population of Portsmouth was in steady decline. Hurricanes in 1899, 1933 and 1944 also took their toll. By 1956 the island counted only 17 residents.

It was at this time that Ocracoke was moving towards becoming a popular vacation spot. Private ferry service across Hatteras Inlet was begun in 1950 by Frazier Peele and the state of North Carolina purchased his operation seven years later. At about the same time the road from the ferry to the village of Ocracoke was constructed. As Ocracoke thrived Portsmouth declined even further. Without paved roads, electricity, ferry service, telephones or other ties to the outside world the village lost even more residents. By the early 1970's only three people remained on the island. When Henry Pigot died in 1971 Marion Gray Babb and Elma Dixon, the last residents, left their homes to live on the mainland.

In 1976 Portsmouth was included in the Cape Lookout National Seashore. Since then much has been done to preserve many of the outstanding buildings still remaining.

Saturday, April 29 saw over 150 people return for the Portsmouth Island Homecoming. Former residents, family and friends arrived by boat all morning and the village was again alive with people walking along the paths, visiting family cemeteries and touring island homes and other buildings.

Today only about two dozen structures remain standing, among them the Post Office, the Schoolhouse, the Life Saving Station and the Methodist Church. Several of the homes are freshly painted and sport new roofs while others are near collapse. To everyone's delight the Church has been stabilized and the windows have been restored.

Portsmouth Island Methodist Church, 1930's:



Portsmouth Island Methodist Church, 2000:



At 11 o'clock the church bell pealed. For many years Henry Pigot had the duty of ringing the bell. Fittingly, on this day one of Henry's relatives was on hand for the task. Visitors quickly gathered inside for singing and sharing of island memories.

Dot Salter Willis recounted the island's history and Jesse Lee Babb recognized island families and their guests. Only nine people living today were born on Portsmouth. Due to health and age many of those were unable to make the long journey home. Dot and Jesse Lee were the only two native islanders in attendance. Jesse Lee was the last baby born on the island and one of the last students to attend school there. When the class size dwindled below three the state of North Carolina closed the school.

**Portsmouth Island Scene with Jesse Babb House in foreground:**



Following the church service we all gathered on the grounds for a pot-luck dinner, complete with fried chicken, ham, turkey and several kinds of potato salad. It was a time to relax, visit with family and friends and savor memories and stories of a time and a place now changed forever.

My father lived on Portsmouth in 1915-1916 when my grandfather was stationed at the Life Saving Station there.

So after dinner we walked down the path leading to where their house had stood. It is no longer there, but nearby is the house where my father's playmate, Cecil Gilgo, lived. Earlier in the day I had spoken with his son, Julian. The Gilgo house is now in need of repair. Roof shingles are missing in places and framing members on the north side are exposed where the siding has deteriorated. But the house still stands as a reminder of a time when children laughed and played in the yard and adults cooked steaming pots of clam chowder

while fishermen mended nets nearby.

Not far away the schoolhouse boasts a new coat of white paint, a secure roof and functioning shutters. Inside, just a few inches from the floor someone has drawn a line and written "Dennis, 08/30/99" to show how high the sea tide rose during the last hurricane.

Before we returned to our boat we made a detour to Doctor's Creek and Henry Pigot's house. It's scale is small, almost like a doll house, with a low white picket fence and detached summer kitchen. The dormers and two small porches provide this house with a sense of grace and proportion. Painted yellow with white trim, it reflects the quiet, solid presence of Portsmouth's last male resident.

#### Henry Pigot's House:



In the back yard stands a reminder of simpler times. With no electricity it was often a challenge to keep meat and other foods fresh for more than a day or two, especially in the hot summer months. Small elevated houses that were screened on all four sides helped by keeping food shaded and open to the air, but protected from flies and other animals.

#### Henry's Screen House:



Back in our boat we pulled away from the dock and watched as the church steeple and Life Saving Station slowly receded in the distance.

#### Portsmouth Island Life Saving Station:



But we will be back another day for more time in this village that time has forgotten.

**Molasses Creek:**

Many of you are now aware of the good news about Molasses Creek.



**Gary Mitchell, David Tweedie and Kitty Mitchell of "Molasses Creek"**

Congratulations are in order for Ocracoke's own folk/bluegrass band, "Molasses Creek." On Saturday, April 15, as part of the Talent from Towns Under 2000 competition on National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" they placed second with their song "The Waterman." With nearly three million listeners to the show this should prove to be a significant boost to their career. Be sure to look for their performance schedule when you are on the island. Use the link above to order cassettes and/or CD's.

**Photography Exhibit:**

An exhibition of documentary photographs detailing life on Ocracoke in the summer of 1955 will be held from now through November 26, 2000 at the Ocracoke Preservation Society Museum.

"Ocracoke Island, July 1955" will feature 30 prints from a collection of about 115 pictures taken by Martha McMillan Roberts that month. Roberts was on commission by Standard Oil of New Jersey to document the island's relationship to the company, which supplied fuel to commercial fishermen. Roberts had trained under painter Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, and served under Roy Stryker as a documentarian for the Farm Security Administration and War Food Administration.

The exhibit captures the last pre-tourism days of Ocracoke island. During that month, there

was no paved state highway leading to Hatteras Inlet, ponies roamed freely throughout the village and other parts of the island, mail was delivered by boat and ferries were small private operations. Even the landscape was dramatically different: One print shows the gentle barren slope of sand which dominated the look of the island before the National Park Service installed barrier dunes and ground-cover vegetation as protection for the highway.

Within five years all that would change.

I was nearly eleven years old when these photos were taken. It was a time for a young boy to experience the magic of this special place first hand.

The exhibit will be on display during regular museum hours April 21-May 27, Monday through Saturday, 11 am to 4 pm; May 28-Sept. 30, Monday through Friday, 10 am to 5 pm and Saturday and Sunday, 11 am to 4 pm; Oct. 1 to Nov. 26, Monday through Saturday, 11 am to 4 pm.

Admission is free. Be sure to stop by.

The exhibit is curated by Ocracoke photographer Ann Sebrell Ehringhaus and sponsored by the Ocracoke Preservation Society. For more information call 252-928-7375 or e-mail [ops@ocracoke-museum.org](mailto:ops@ocracoke-museum.org).

**Two Photos from "Special Collections: Photographic Archives University of Louisville"**



Thanks to all of you who have let us know how much you enjoy hearing news and stories and history from Ocracoke.

Until next time, take care and enjoy life.

Philip and the entire staff at Village Craftsmen