

Modern-day visitors to Ocracoke Island typically imagine that the small village of several hundred homes clustered around strikingly charming Silver Lake harbor has always been a “traditional fishing village.”

Although fishing has long been one of Ocracoke’s major activities, before the advent of motor-powered vessels and modern refrigeration, transportation of seafood to mainland markets was frustratingly difficult and often took prohibitively long. The island was able to support little more than a modest commercial fishing industry until the dawn of the twentieth century.

It was seafaring and related jobs that provided early Ocracokers with their primary source of income. In the nineteenth century young island men regularly shipped off on schooners, many to become captains and even owners of two- three- and four-masted ships that carried lumber, coal, molasses, and rum along the eastern seaboard. A modest boat-building trade also emerged on the island.

Seafaring, of course, was part of a larger mercantile enterprise. As early as 1789 John Blount and John Wallace had established a business center on nearby Shell Castle Rock, a 25 acre island of oyster shells in Pamlico Sound. At one time as many as 40 people lived and worked there, part of an extended enterprise that received goods from sea-going vessels, transferred them to lighter boats that could navigate eastern North Carolina’s shallow sounds, and delivered them to waiting merchants in Bath, Plymouth, New Bern, and other inland ports.

On Shell Castle the entrepreneurs built homes, docks, warehouses, a wind-powered grist mill, and at least one small store. This was also the site of Ocracoke Inlet’s first lighthouse, a 55’ wooden, pyramid-shaped tower covered with cedar shingles, and mounted on a substantial stone foundation. Atop the tower was a six-foot lantern and a three-foot dome.

**Early 1800’s Pitcher Showing Settlement on Shell Castle Rock:**



The location of the lighthouse was chosen because of its benefit to local pilots and merchants, as well as to owners and captains of vessels that regularly used Ocracoke Inlet. It was primarily an economic decision.

Shell Castle Rock was not the only center of commerce near Ocracoke Inlet. A small settlement had developed on Williams' Point (later called Howard's Point, and ultimately Springer's Point) on the southwestern shoreline of Ocracoke Island. Public land was set aside there for the use of the pilots who guided the many sailing vessels that passed through Ocracoke Inlet, North Carolina's only consistently navigable inlet until 1846, when both Oregon and Hatteras Inlets were opened by a violent storm. Pilots were necessary to help captains unfamiliar with the shoals and narrow, ever-shifting channels bring their goods safely to port.

In time homes, docks, warehouses, stables, and at least one store dotted the shoreline at the Point. In addition, there was a blacksmith shop on the point, and even a windmill.

By the early nineteenth century an increasing number of islanders had also settled on the north side of Cackle Creek (Silver Lake), and an existing footpath was widened to create what was soon to become the island's "main road." Beginning near the present-day School Road, it included what is today known as Howard Street, and continued all the way to the sound shore.

There, in the vicinity of the modern-day ferry offices and Ocracoke Preservation Society Museum, John Pike and Willis Williams opened stores that sold general merchandise. Willis Williams' establishment, at the mouth of the "ditch," also included a small tavern. T.S.

Blackwell operated a store some distance to the east.

Over the years a number of other general merchandise stores sprang up around the village.

In the early 1800s, on the “creek side,” Solomon Howard established a store where Lawton Howard’s home is today, on the corner of Lawton Lane and Howard Street. Later, A.B. Howard built a relatively large store on Cockle Creek. Ownership eventually passed to M.L. Piland, and still later to “Big Ike” O’Neal. Nearby, Walter O’Neal opened another store, as did Dr. Charlie Angle, although his merchandise was limited primarily to patent medicines, candy, and soft drinks.

As a young man Homer Howard operated a store where the Community Store is now located. His son, Lawton, said the store did not last long because his father “ate up all the profits.” More likely, his good nature prevented him from collecting money owed to him on charge accounts.

Charlie Minor O’Neal sold groceries, soft drinks, and more from his establishment on what is now the British Cemetery Road. Will Willis’ general store was unique. It was situated on the end of his dock in Cockle Creek.

Bill Styron had a small establishment “down point” (near the lighthouse) where he sold ice cream and milk shakes. Albert Styron’s store was nearby. It became the commercial center on that side of the village with a large assortment of groceries and fresh meat. Clarence Scarborough ran a modest business not far away.

One of the largest general stores on Ocracoke was that established by John W. McWilliams in the late 1800s. Located down point, on the shore of Cockle Creek, with a view of the harbor from one side, and the lighthouse from the other, the “Department Store,” as it came to be called, included several structures joined together. McWilliams traded in groceries, boating supplies, hardware, clothing, and other general merchandise. He even carried a line of furniture. A barber shop sat across the lane. The fierce storm of 1933 did considerable damage to the store, and sometime after John McWilliams’ death the store was abandoned.

Amasa Fulcher (1876-1946), a former member of the US Lighthouse Service, worked with John McWilliams for several years. In 1918 “Mace,” who lived “around creek,” left the McWilliams enterprise and established the Community Store on the harbor nearer to his home.

The Community Store soon became a focal point of community activity on the north side of

Cockle Creek. Mace was a prominent and upright citizen, and an active member of the Ocracoke Methodist Episcopal Church (Ocracokers called this the “Northern Church”). By all accounts he conducted business in a “fair and square” manner. Although his opinions may not have always been popular (he was a Republican in a predominantly Democratic township), he was universally respected.

In later years Mace was elected one of the island directors of the county-wide fraternal organization, Knights of Hyde. As a prominent Methodist layman, the task of conducting burial rites for the crew of the British armed trawler, “Bedforshire,” fell to him in 1942.

The Community Store was a square building with a “shed addition” attached to the northwest side. Although close to the sandy lane that would eventually be called North Carolina Highway 12, the main entrance faced Cockle Creek. A porch with benches invited customers to stop and chat for a few minutes, or to sit for hours. Men congregated there to swap tales, tell jokes, carve small wooden birds, and talk about fishing and the weather.

The accompanying dock extended up to the store and connected with the front porch. A small barbershop operated by Gillis Riddick, Mace’s step-son-in-law, was erected alongside the dock, a few yards from the porch. A short section of the dock adjacent to the porch was customarily lifted up to allow passage along a sandy path that led around the shore of the harbor. The removable section was lowered whenever a shipment arrived at the dock, and boxes and barrels of new goods were hauled into the store. A fish house on the end of the dock served the growing number of commercial fishermen.

#### The Community Store, ca. 1944:



(Photo courtesy of Ocracoke Preservation Society.)

Inside, not far from the front door, stood a large pot-bellied stove. Kerosene lanterns provided light when it was needed. The Community Store had no spittoon, but a round cheese box filled with sand served the same purpose. A wooden rocker was pulled up close to the stove on cold winter days, and two or three other chairs stood nearby.

With fewer than 900 square feet, the store nevertheless held a copious amount and variety

of merchandise.

There were groceries, of course. These were arranged on shelves behind the long, wide counter along the right hand side of the store. All of the usual items were there — flour, bread, sugar, salt, canned milk, butter, jellies, spices, and other staples. On the counter rested three large oval glass containers, fastened together and filled with hard candy. Small scales served for weighing candy. Larger scales for weighing other bulk items sat on the counter as well, near the brass cash register.

Wooden bins filled with potatoes were stacked under the front window. Barrels held beans and peas. Another large barrel held high quality West Indies Molasses. Rice was displayed in an adjacent container.

Tea and coffee, as well as various brands of snuff and tobacco, were also offered for sale.

Meat was often in short supply, although salt pork and slab bacon were almost always on hand. Large tubs of lard complimented the grocery section.

Children loved to inspect the cookie display. Six boxes of FFV (Famous Foods of Virginia) cookies, both plain and fancy, were stacked neatly near the center of the store. One of the favorites, “Mary Jane” cookies, contained molasses. Mr. Mace also sold “Johnny Cakes,” fig newtons, chocolate cookies, and marshmallow cookies with sprinkles.

A prominent feature of the store was a large wheel of cheddar cheese that perched on the counter. A heavy cast iron cheese cutter stood ready for Mr. Mace. After years of experience he could slice just the right amount for a customer almost every time.

In the center of the store, behind the pot-bellied stove, stood a long handmade walnut table with shelves built on top of it. Here Mr. Mace displayed bib overalls and dungarees. Above these were men’s, women’s and children’s shoes. Higher yet were caps and hats. Underneath the table he stocked rubber boots and tennis shoes.

A small office was located in the back corner, on the left. Adjacent to it were shelves of sewing material. There was white material for bed clothes and such. Bolts of material for work clothes, printed material for children’s togs and house dresses, and fancy materials for Sunday clothes rounded out the selection. Nearby was the O.N.T. (Our New Thread) cabinet with spools of cotton, needles, buttons, and other supplies, including several patterns of fancy lace.

A glass showcase on the same side of the building contained dress shirts, collars, pants,

dresses, socks and underwear. A tall glass case was used to display perfumes and other cosmetics.

Other areas of the Community Store were filled with dishes, pots and pans, and sundry household items. Mops and brooms were hung from nails and pegs, as were oil skins and other boating supplies. Kerosene lamps, along with wicks, chimneys, and shades, were arranged next to new-fangled flashlights and batteries.

To meet the needs of local carpenters and do-it-yourselfers, Mr. Mace carried an assortment of nails, screws, tacks, nuts and bolts, and other hardware.

Oil and gasoline tanks on the property provided fuel for fishing vessels, and even for the small but increasing numbers of motor vehicles.

At Christmas time, Mace would rearrange the center shelf and pile it high with toys, gifts, and other enticements for the holiday season.

One noteworthy feature of Ocracoke's Community Store was the shed-roofed "lean-to" on the northwest side of the building. In addition to chicken and horse feed Mace added a rather unusual item to his inventory. For years islanders had been keeping casket boards under their houses or over the rafters in outbuildings. When a death occurred a carpenter was summoned to nail the boards together to fashion a simple pine casket.

But times were changing. Sometime in the 1940s the Community Store began selling professionally built caskets. Two adult and one child's casket were now kept in stock on a regular basis. Neighbors no longer had need of their casket boards and many were used for other projects. At least one dining room table on the island was constructed from wood originally intended as a coffin.

Mace Fulcher died in 1946. Shortly thereafter his widow, Maude Williams Fulcher, sold the Community Store to Mace's sister's husband, Isaac Freeman O'Neal (known by all as "Little Ike"), and Little Ike's son-in-law, Jesse Woolard Garrish. Although the store retained the official name, The Community Store, it became popularly known as Garrish & O'Neal's Store.

Sometime in the early 1950s Little Ike and Jesse had the original building demolished, and a new, larger store built in its place. The Community Store was a growing business. As a result, several years later the new store was enlarged. By the mid-1950s the store was commonly referred to simply as "Jesse's Store." Presumably by then Little Ike had sold his

interest to Jesse Garrish.

Jesse was an energetic and hard working man. He was also pleasant and quick-witted. The store thrived under his ownership. By then change was in the air, however. Frazier Peele ran his first ferry across Hatteras Inlet in 1950, and the state of North Carolina took over operations several years later. Just as importantly, sandy lanes throughout the village were being paved, and a new, hard-surface road was laid down from the village to the north end of the island.

With better access to markets, fishing became a more practical occupation. And an ever growing tourist industry was initiated. The Community Store became a gathering place for locals and visitors alike. A bench and rockers on the front porch beckoned all to sit and share stories. This was the place to be if visitors wanted to meet local fishermen and island characters.

By then, Jesse had purchased coolers and freezers. Mayola ice cream was popular with the local teenagers, along with soft drinks and Nabs. Boys and girls spent many summer afternoons on the porch, drinking Coca-Cola (filled with peanuts), or Orange Crush, listening to the old-timers recount tales from years gone by. Whittlers wiled away many an hour on the Community Store porch carving seagulls and pelicans. They prized Mayola's small wooden ice cream spoons because they were shaped just right for fashioning wings.

In 1962 Jesse died and his son, Danny, took over operation of the store. Like his daddy, Danny loved people and enjoyed bantering with locals and tourists alike. He hired good folks to help him out. One of his most memorable employees was Monford (Monk) Garrish who had the enviable ability to say the most outrageous things without offending anyone.

Of course, the store continued to provide groceries and basic necessities. In addition they began carrying coolers, suntan lotion, and other items for the tourist trade. One afternoon a woman from off-island walked up to the counter and asked Monk if they sold Nose-Kote, an early brand-name sun block designed especially for noses and ears. Monk immediately noticed that the woman had a larger-than-average nose. Without a moment's hesitation he blurted out, "Yes ma'am, we do carry Nose-Kote....but not in gallon buckets."

The Community Store functioned as headquarters for the Burial Association. A large map of the Community Cemetery and its various plots (with names of those interred there) hung on the office wall. Even after Twiford's Funeral Home in Hatteras began directing funerals on Ocracoke Danny and Monk continued to tend to the immediate needs of the deceased and their families. It was not uncommon for Monk to transport a body from the church to the

cemetery on his old blue Jeep pickup truck.

In 1978 Danny's mother, Lucille, decided to sell the store. Philip and Julia Howard purchased it. They continued to hire Danny as manager. While they owned the store, the warehouse section, which had been an attached "L" extension alongside and parallel to NC Highway 12, was detached, moved, and reattached to the store in its present location near Silver Lake (Cockle Creek).

### The Community Store, ca. 1980:



Philip and Julia kept the store stocked with all of the modern-day necessities, as well as items reminiscent of Mace's general store. Pottery mixing bowls, agate cookware, tin cups and buckets, coal oil lamps, and wheel cheese shared space with cereal boxes, cans of vegetables, bread, cookies, flour, and soft drinks.

In 1980 Philip and Julia, unable to manage two businesses (they already owned the Village Craftsmen on Howard Street) sold the Community Store to David and Sherrill Senseney. Long-time employee, Ricky Tillett, eventually took over management of the store.

Located on Silver Lake near several docks and other businesses, the Community Store continued to be a magnet for locals and visitors. A bulletin board on the porch was always filled with posters and announcements - pot lucks, fish fries, items for sale. A nearby chalkboard listed the day's birthdays and anniversaries, as well as other significant events.

Islanders were saddened when the Community Store closed its doors in the spring of 2006, after eighty-eight years of uninterrupted operation. Although the Ocracoke Variety Store, which had been serving islanders for several decades, continued to live up to its name with a large assortment of groceries, t-shirts, hardware, and other items, Ocracoke residents and visitors continued to hope that in the near future another entrepreneur would come forward to inject new life into the Community Store, one of the island's most prominent traditional businesses.



## **Update, April, 2008:**

In 2007 James and Susan Paul made that dream come true with a commitment to lease the Community Store from David Senseney. Throughout the winter and spring of 2008 they have been busy repairing, restoring, repainting, and cleaning the store. Reopening is scheduled for Thursday, May 1, 2008 at 6 a.m., an event eagerly anticipated by Ocracoke residents.

### **The Community Store, ca. 2000:**



With determination, hard work, and the support of the community, James and Susan, trading as the Community Store, should continue to serve the village of Ocracoke for many years to come.