

Ocracoke did not get official street names until 1999. Street signs appeared in 2005. For most of Ocracoke's history islanders simply used landmarks or residents' names to designate particular streets, or to give directions.

In the early 1980s a generous island widow, Myrtle Doolittle, donated a parcel of land to her beloved Methodist minister and his wife who were being transferred to a congregation on the mainland. I was asked to design a small compact house they could use as a vacation getaway. A local carpenter and various friends volunteered to build the cottage.

One afternoon, as I was digging a hole for one of the house's pilings, I cut through an underground telephone cable.

For years local resident Randall Mathews was the island's one and only telephone repairman. It was common practice to simply call Randall about any telephone problems or issues, and he would promptly make the repair. However, shortly before this incident the telephone company had established a company-wide 800 number to call for all customer repair issues.

I called the number and quickly realized the service representative was not from eastern North Carolina, and had never heard of Ocracoke. I discovered she was located in Kansas. The conversation went something like this:

Me: Hello, I am calling to report a severed telephone cable.

Her: Yes sir, can you tell me where you are located?

Me: Ocracoke Island, North Carolina.

Her: And where exactly is the severed cable?

Me: Well, it is about halfway between Myrtle Doolittle's house and the new cottage we are building for the Methodist minister.

Her: Sir, can you please give me the street address?

Me: I am sorry, but we don't have street addresses.

Her: You don't have street addresses? How will I know where to send the repairman?

Me: Randall will know where this is.

Her: Who is Randall?

Me: Randall is our telephone repairman.

Her: But I still need to know what to tell him

Me: Please tell Randall to go behind Myrtle's house, and walk toward the road where Mrs. Padgett lives. He will see the lot where we are building a small cottage for the Methodist minister. Actually, I found a concrete turtle on Myrtle's porch steps. I carried it over to the construction site and set it down so it is pointing directly at the hole I was digging when I cut the telephone cable. He will have no problem finding the severed cable if he just looks for the concrete turtle.

Her: (There was a lengthy silece before she replied.) Uhh,...OK....I'll pass this message on to the repairman. Thank you very much.

Several days later I saw Randall at the Post Office. "Did you get the telephone cable repaired," I asked him.

"Oh my gosh," he said, "that woman in Kansas was so befuddled. All she could say was that some man called to say that 'Myrtle Somebody' had a turtle that was stuck in concrete and that somehow the turtle had cut a telephone cable. I think she thought you might have been calling from an insane asylum."

We had a good laugh, and Randall told me he had found the severed cable and made the repair.