

Passing the Torch

Old Baldy Campus Expansion Illuminates History for Next Generation

By Christi Golder

“Stories become more real when you have tangible things to show,” said Chris Webb, executive director of the Old Baldy Foundation, while sitting at her dining room table overlooking Bald Head Creek. “Like the U.S. Lighthouse Service uniform,” she continued. “It’s a 95-degree day and you’re standing there looking at that little uniform, picturing the slight person that was in it, hauling whale oil around, unloading it from boats.”

She’s describing one of the most prized artifacts in the Foundation’s collection, a blue woolen uniform worn by a lighthouse keeper more than a century ago.



Currently, the uniform is displayed in a replica lighthouse keeper’s cottage that serves as the Smith Island Museum of History, a gift shop and bookstore, as well as offices for the Old Baldy Foundation staff. Importantly, the diminutive cottage serves a much larger purpose.

“We act as a welcome center for the island. Generally, for day visitors who come to the island, we’re their first stop,” said Webb. “They always have lots of questions. We help orient them, both geographically and historically, and then they go on to enjoy other amenities of the island.”

Left: Cape Fear Lighthouse, circa 1903

The less than 1,000-square foot building truly functions as the unofficial “front door” for 30,000 annual visitors to Old Baldy Lighthouse.

The Foundation was established in 1985 with land and funding provided by the Mitchell family, Bald Head Island’s developers. Kent Mitchell served on the board for decades, while Donna Ray was the Foundation’s first president. Webb said that 40 years ago, no one could have imagined the volume of visitors the lighthouse would eventually see. Now, with the keeper’s cottage bursting at the seams, most of the Foundation’s extensive collection of artifacts is relegated to storage in an island warehouse.

“It doesn’t do the community or our visitors any good by having our artifacts on shelves in boxes,” said Webb.

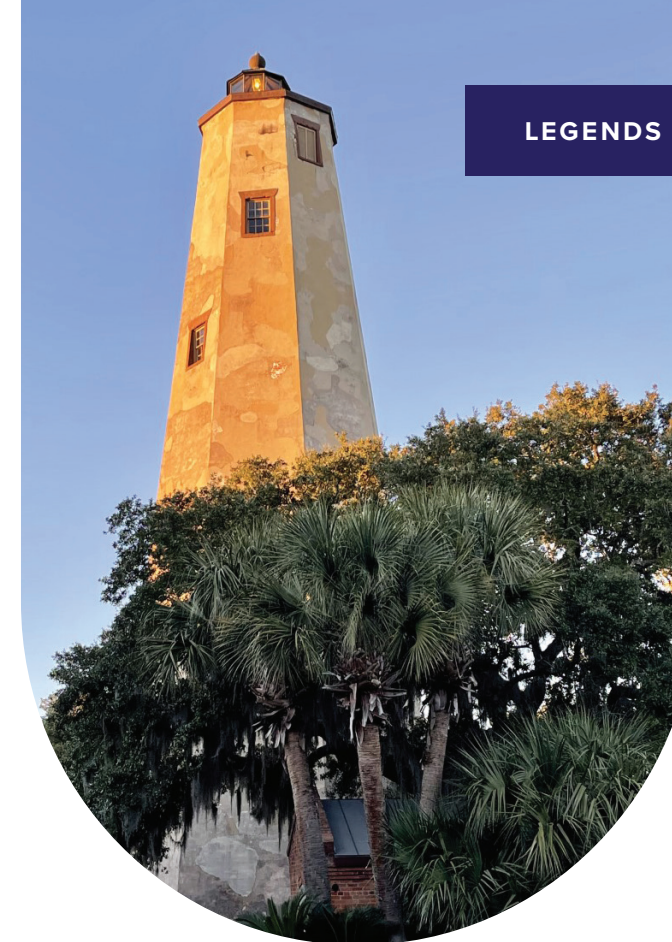
Longtime Bald Head Island property owner and current Old Baldy Foundation President Mark Prak couldn’t agree more.

“We’re really limited in terms of the space we have to display historical artifacts and other aspects of the history of Bald Head,” said Prak. “We have a number of artifacts in storage, which the staff have worked diligently to catalog, but we really have no place to display those in any sort of consistent or comprehensive way so that the history of Bald Head and the lower Cape Fear can be appreciated.”

Over the past decade, the Foundation board has searched for the ideal location for a campus expansion that would better serve the community’s needs. Initially, land adjacent to the existing keeper’s cottage was identified as a possibility but was ruled out due to the position of the site. More recently, the grassy area between the brick oil house and Village Chapel was considered, but it, too, had its drawbacks. Prak, along with his wife Robin, had other ideas.

“I thought it would be better positioned on the land across from the current Old Baldy museum and keeper’s cottage,” said Prak. “I had discussions with Chad Paul of Bald Head Island Limited and we were able to come to an agreement for Robin and me to purchase that land in December 2021. So, we purchased the land from Limited and immediately donated it to the Foundation.” Acquiring the property, Webb said, was contingent on the Village of Bald Head Island agreeing to close off the northwestern end of Lighthouse Wynd to make it pedestrian-only.

“I was opposed unless we could find a way to close the road because I felt it was a safety concern that we couldn’t have our campus split in half like that,” said Webb. “Mark [Prak] was not dissuaded or discouraged. He said, ‘Well, let’s try and close the road.’ So, he teed that up and was successful in envisioning a Village Center.”



LEGENDS + LORE

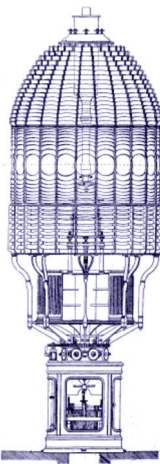
Prak was encouraged by the Village’s receptivity to closing the road and how the idea meshed with Mayor Peter Quinn’s vision and the Village Council’s wish to create a safer, more welcoming, more easily accessible approach from the ferry landing to the lighthouse and Village Center.

“We petitioned the Village Council to close that street and the Council has been supportive of our plans, as have the other stakeholders in the Village, the homeowners’ association, the Chapel, the Village post office and just about everybody,” said Prak.

With the right location secured, the Foundation turned its attention to the campus site design. The initial impetus for the project, and its beating heart still today, is the Foundation’s desire to properly display the First Order Fresnel Lens of the Cape Fear Light that once stood near Captain Charlie’s Cottages.

Prior to the decommissioning and demolition of the Cape Fear Light in 1958, its lens was dismantled. Over the course of the next half century, piece by piece, the lens’s glass prisms and bullseye panels were bought by customers of Labriola’s antique shop in Wilmington, N.C. In 2009, when the shop closed, the Foundation purchased the unsold parts. While 100 percent of the frame and the chariot (the turning mechanism base) are intact, Webb estimates only about 35 percent of the panels and prisms are available for display, and the Foundation is still actively soliciting for them to be returned.

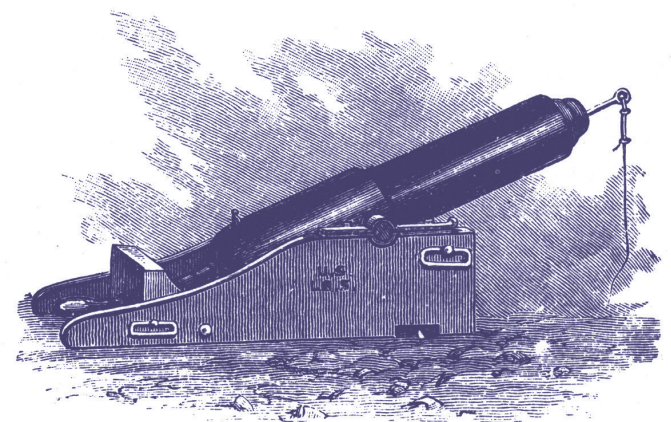
Lens components continue to come out of the woodwork, with two prisms recently purchased for \$5 each in Wilmington by a Foundation event planner, Julie Coxe, who stumbled across them at an estate sale.



Fresnel lens

Visitors to the interpretive center will enter a winding gallery that leads to a dramatically lit display of the Fresnel lens as the final exhibit. Including the chariot undercarriage on which it sits, the lens is 18 feet tall. The chariot will drop below the finished floor into a waterproof concrete drum but will still be visible. Lampists, most of them Coast Guard retirees, will clean the panels and prisms and use a special putty to attach them to the metal frame. It's the Foundation's intention that the public be able to view the fascinating and painstaking process of the lens being reassembled on site.

In addition to the Fresnel lens, dozens of other important artifacts will be displayed for the first time, including pottery sherds from an archaeological dig performed on the lighthouse grounds, a Revolutionary-War era button from a British officer's uniform found near the lighthouse, a logbook from the Cape Fear Lifesaving Station, and a can that held gunpowder for a Lyle gun that helped rescue sailors stranded on Frying Pan Shoals.



Lyle gun

“The Fresnel lens is so large, it has to be displayed in a two-story environment to be properly viewed,” explained Webb.

“We intend to follow the National Park Service guidelines on how to care for a Fresnel lens. So, it has to be protected from solar. It has to be in a climate-controlled environment. It also can't be touched by the visitor. And for proper viewing, if you have something that tall, you have to be able to stand back to fully appreciate it.”

“When you can see something, you can visualize better than just reading it on a flat piece of paper,” emphasized Webb. “When you have three-dimensional objects from that period you can picture the Lifesaving Service hauling a Lyle gun down the beach and using a breeches buoy. You can get a better feel for what people were doing and it brings history to life.”

Prak expressed his excitement over the richer experience the Foundation staff could create for visitors, given the opportunity for more room.

“With the limited space we have, our various historians have done a really great job, and Chris [Webb] and the staff have put things up online,” said Prak. “They’ve made a lot of telling of the history possible. But some of these things just have to be shown. I’m most excited about the ability to have museum quality displays prepared that tell the history in a way that allows adults and children to be able to learn it, know it, and appreciate it more fully,” he continued.

In addition to bringing previously unseen artifacts out of storage, the interpretive center will improve the presentation of objects the public already sees, said Webb.

“The rudder of the La Rosa di Bilboa [a Spanish galleon shipwrecked off the shore of Bald Head Island in 1804] is in the dark inside the lighthouse, very hard to see, very hard to interpret. So, it's the interpretation of these artifacts and the correct method of display that is important and that we hope to achieve with a campus expansion,” Webb said.

Along with vastly improving the display space, the Foundation believes the campus expansion will further its educational goals for children and seniors. On average, the Foundation annually hosts 800 fourth graders from the region through its Lighthouse Learners program, as well as numerous age-55-and-up groups from the surrounding area. With enhanced facilities, they could accommodate more.

“It will definitely improve and heighten the experience for school children and school groups,” said Webb. “We’ll be able to handle them in adverse weather. We also can expand our adult and senior groups.”

Education of young and old alike is a key component of the Foundation's mission, said Prak, and an area they hope to grow.

“It's not just children. It's also older adults. We have a historic tours program that our chief educator takes folks on, narrating the story of what the island's uses have been over the years. The opportunity to do that in a way that does it justice is what we're looking to be able to accomplish,” Prak said.

With expanded space comes the ability to paint a more complete picture of the lower Cape Fear and its historical importance.



Event pavilion conceptual drawing

“We can tell the story of the history of not only the island, but the region. The maritime history of the region is a very rich history, and what the visitor will find is that what happened here in the Cape Fear region did have an effect on a lot of different parts of the country,” said Webb.

Along with the exhibit gallery, the lower level of the interpretive center will house an expanded gift shop and bookstore. Upstairs will be staff offices and a conference room with a large window overlooking the Fresnel lens display. Both Prak and Webb envision other community organizations using the conference room.

“We’re trying to design the building in such a way that it offers utility not only for the Old Baldy Foundation’s mission, but also potential for other community groups to make use of things,” said Prak.

The adjacent event pavilion, which the Foundation intends to build first, will span Lighthouse Wynd, linking the existing lighthouse grounds with the new campus, while supplying much-needed covered outdoor space for Foundation events, community gatherings and private receptions.

“We have an immediate need for a pavilion,” said Webb. “I think we can make great use out of it, not only for events, but school children. It will have a viewing area where we’ll be able to project programs. It will be used in lieu of an indoor theater. It will be a great outdoor community space that I think we are in dire need of.”

Identifying an architect who could successfully take on the project design was no small task. The site itself is a “puzzle,” said Webb, with several large trees punctuating the grounds. After research and discussion, the Foundation board voted unanimously to offer the project to Chip Hemingway, an architect based out of Wilmington, N.C., with a 25-year track record.

“First and foremost, he's a talented architect and also an artist,” said Webb. “He was very familiar with the island. He was already doing work for the Village on the new Village Hall, so he understood the neighborhood.”

Hemingway's extensive portfolio includes many North Carolina museums and exhibit spaces, including Jennette's Pier Aquarium in Nags Head, the Pine Island Sanctuary for the National

Audubon Society in Corolla, the N.C. Aquarium on Roanoke Island, and restoration of the Oregon Inlet Lifesaving Station. An accomplished artist, Hemingway has visited Bald Head Island numerous times over the years, painting its landscapes, homes and icons, including Old Baldy. Hemingway's self-described approach to his work is “a journey into nature through art and architecture.” In the end, he seemed like a perfect fit for the job.

“The combination we were looking for was a modern museum gallery, but in keeping with the coastal vernacular design that the island embodies. Chip is able to integrate those two things. Through his portfolio of work, we saw that in him,” said Webb.

Prak couldn't agree more. “The Board was impressed by the number of other museums and similar kinds of projects that Mr. Hemingway has done. His background and resume seemed ideal for the task,” he said.

In an early presentation to the Foundation board, Hemingway spoke of the unique challenges and opportunities the campus site presented, and how they informed his approach.

“If I was coming to a place that had been cleared of vegetation, I might start with the interiors and exhibit design components first,” said Hemingway. “But this site is so special. There are specimen trees, there's undulating topography. So, it was important to work from the outside of the buildings in.”

The resulting preliminary site design fulfills the requirements put forth to Hemingway by the Foundation Board's building committee: ample space for showcasing the Fresnel lens and other historic artifacts, a roomier gift shop/bookstore, sufficient office and meeting space for Foundation staff, and a versatile open-air event pavilion—all while respecting the existing natural landscape. Additionally, the plan includes a crofter cottage to be built behind the existing keeper's cottage that will serve as accommodations for staff, lecturers and researchers. Importantly, with exhibits primarily displayed in the new interpretive center, the first floor of the keeper's cottage can return to a replica lightkeeper's dwelling. The cottage's attic space, which currently houses staff offices, will become a library and research room for interns and visiting scholars.



Lens exhibit conceptual drawing

"This has been a wonderful, wonderfully challenging project because of the constraints that we've talked about—the topography, the trees, the scale, the existing infrastructure, history—all the things that have been put together to come out with this plan," said Hemingway. "It's got all the elements that make for a great project as an architect. Of course, I'm in love with every project I'm working on, but this might be my best one."

Succinctly put, Hemingway's design is a "modern facility with historic character," said Webb. Ever the pragmatist, Webb emphasized that while spacious, the interpretive center is smaller than the new Village Hall, which will be built nearby, and it can be operated at existing staffing levels.

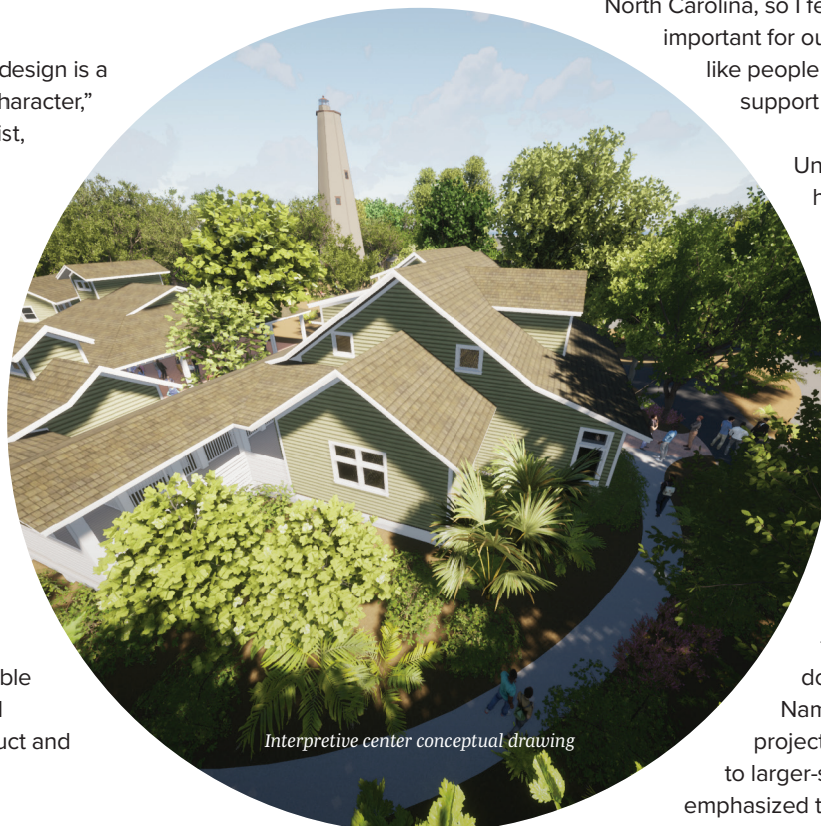
"Our goal was to design something that everyone on the island can be proud of and enjoy," said Prak. "Of course, the site plan will have to be signed off on by the Village Council. We're going to try to drive as large a consensus as is possible for the project. And then we'll need to raise funds to construct and operate it."

In all, the Foundation estimates the entire project will cost around \$5 million and will take five years to complete. With the fundraising campaign officially underway and continuing throughout 2023 in earnest, the Foundation hopes to break ground on the event pavilion by year end.

"Things haven't succeeded on Bald Head without community involvement and support," said Prak. "We definitely need the support of all the people in the community, and we particularly want those who have the ability to make significant charitable contributions to consider a gift to the Old Baldy Foundation to advance the project. There will be plenty of opportunities for people to be involved, and we'd love to hear from anybody who wants to become involved. We'd appreciate gifts from all comers, large and small."

While gaining fundraising traction on the island is the Foundation's first step, ideally, project support will extend to the surrounding region and beyond.

"Ever since I joined the organization, I really felt like the lighthouse was not just a treasure of Bald Head Island but a treasure of the state," said Webb. "It is the oldest standing lighthouse in North Carolina, so I feel like the broader reach is important for our fundraising efforts. I feel like people in the region should want to support the effort."



Unlike most of North Carolina's historic lighthouses, which are maintained by the National Park Service, Old Baldy Lighthouse is one of only two privately-owned lighthouses in the state. As such, it relies on admission fees, gift shop sales, special events, grants and most critically—donations—for ongoing maintenance and operations. Similarly, campus expansion fundraising will center on donations by private individuals. Naming opportunities for various project components will be offered to larger-scale donors, but Webb emphasized that no gift is too small, and pledges can be spread over five years.

For an organization whose central aim remains the caretaking of a centuries-old lighthouse, the Foundation's vision is ambitiously forward-thinking.

"What we're really looking to do is preserve and protect Old Baldy for the next generation and leave something better than we found it in terms of our little piece of island paradise here," summarized Prak. 🏰

Conceptual drawings are for illustrative purposes only and are subject to change without notice.

To learn how you can support the Old Baldy Foundation's efforts, visit

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