

the Quiet wild

It's a small place, this barrier island at the southern end of the state. About three miles long. About two miles wide. A perfect ecosystem in a triangle of migratory marshland, maritime forest, and ocean beach. You get here by boat or not at all, pulled into the harbor by way of the Cape Fear River. Cars are not permitted — nothing with a combustion engine — and everything is slow going, slow growing, slow moving. Barrier islands protect inland areas — without Bald Head Island, there'd be no Wilmington. But who speaks for this place? We do.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY CHAPLIN

BALD HEAD ISLAND



At the beginning of the 20th century, development threatened this island. Plans to promote the area as “Palmetto Island” and create a carnival atmosphere in the 1920s fell through. Conservationists took over, and by 1983, 10,000 of the island’s 12,000 acres went into a state-supported protective easement. Nature is the predominant character here. Live oaks bend and bow over the roads, called “wynds” for the way they wind and meander through the maritime forest, and leave the environment undisturbed.





About 220 full-time residents live on the island, so an emergency service system needs to be in place. Darin Church (fire), Nathan Mcconnel (police), Wes Mankin (medic), and Ed Hutt (water rescue) answer the call of duty.

Suzanne Dorsey, executive director of the Bald Head Island Conservancy, takes her role as protector of Bald Head Island's natural habitats seriously. She monitors the beaches for evidence of dune health, and she gets excited by the appearance of healthy indicator plants like searocket.



The convergence where the Cape Fear River meets the Atlantic Ocean is known as Cape Fear Point. Come here at low tide, and stand on the sandbar. You'll get a sense of what it means to be isolated in a place built from nothing but sand and water and sky.



Capt. Charlie Swan and his family lived in the lighthouse keepers' cottages from 1903 to 1933. The cottages are on the National Historic Register now, and they've been fully renovated: You can stay here with your own family and experience what life may have been like a century ago.



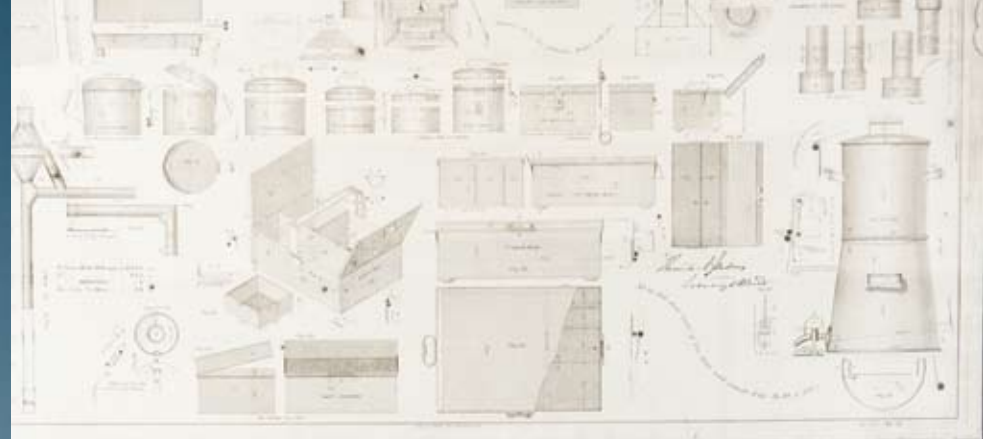


Where there are lighthouses, you'll likely find Indian blanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*). The plant even has a nickname — "lighthouse-keepers' flowers" — that reflects how it likely found its way here, clustered near Old Baldy.



In keeping with strict conservation specifications, cars aren't permitted on the island. You can't travel very fast in an electric golf cart, but then, why would you want to? Take your time crossing the wooden bridge connecting the harbor to the south side of the island, and enjoy the view of Old Baldy.





Captain Charles Swan
Cape Fear Light Keeper
1903-1933

No one knew Bald Head Island better than Capt. Charles Norton Swan. He spent summers on the island as a young boy in the 1880s, then grew up to become a lighthouse keeper, who served the Cape Fear Lighthouse from 1903 to 1933. Exhibits in the Smith Island Museum of History recreate his three decades of service to and affection for this place he loved so much.

Postmaster Joanne Bruce and longtime resident Harper Peterson know every inch of this island — inside and outside.

BALD · HEAD · ISLAND
POST · OFFICE



WINDOW SERVICE
Mon. - Fri.
MAIL LEAVES ISLAND
at 3 p.m. Mon. - Fri.

MAIL DROP



Built by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1914, the boathouse has since migrated beyond the tidal creek that used to be below it. It's a reminder that barrier islands move and shift. But the migratory creatures somehow always find their way back.



By sundown, natural light begins to fade on Bald Head Island, and we adapt to the evening glow. The use of exterior lights on beachside houses is discouraged. Bald Head Island is a sea turtle nesting area, and artificial lights interfere with migration. You won't find many more lights in the harbor, either. Here, night is for rest.

