

Willis' Fish House (Jack's Store), 1930



Sometime around 1930, Captain Will G. Willis had a dock and fish house built. The building was a one-story, two-bay structure with a hipped roof and several shed porches. Fishermen brought their boats, full of fish to sell to the local people, and docked here. It became an unofficial center of commercial fishing. According to Blanche Joliff, they sold big blocks of ice for use in homes and on fishing boats before 1938 when electricity and refrigeration arrived on the island. Ten years later Willis turned the business into a general store as well, selling commonly needed merchandise.

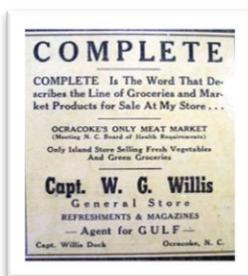
Known as Willis's Store and Fish House, it became a popular place where folks gathered to meet the mail boats, the Aleta and later the Dolphin, which brought in not only mail but passengers. Gaynelle Tillett recalls that they sold ice cream at the store, and the teenagers loved to hang out there. Betty Helen Howard Chamberlain has fond recollections of going there when she was around four years old. Every Sunday after church she and her mother, Elizabeth Howard, along with most of the village, would go to meet the mail boat, the Aleta. Betty Helen would get a cup of ice cream, and her mother would pour coca cola over it, making it fizz.

Upon Willis' death, the store and fish house were taken over by his wife Malsey, who leased it to M.S. Murden, later Russell Williams, and finally Irvin Garrish. Lots of the island youth would go there to swim. Betty Helen recalls that when she was eleven or twelve, she and her friends would jump off the dock into the Creek. There was an outdoor snack bar next to the dock then, with milk shakes. Betty Helen's favorite was pineapple orange, and she still remembers what great times those were.



In 1958, Will and Malsey's son, Jack Willis, took over the business, and it became a hub of charter fishing. It was then known simply as Jack's Store.

Native islanders continue to call it Jack's Store. It continued to be a popular gathering place, and when the Sunday paper arrived at the store, people would come together to learn the news. Jack sold Gulf gasoline at the end of the dock, and stored the fuel in above-ground tanks in the Square. Jack's son Jackie recalls big shrimp trawlers coming in at the dock with their catch.



Around 1981 Jack moved his store into the former electric plant, and Tommy Smith opened a bait and tackle shop at the old Willis fish house. Soon after, Charlie O'Neal took over the business and renamed it O'Neal's Dockside.

The Senseney's bought the Willis fish house, O'Neal's store and the dock in 1984. Later when Charlie moved O'Neal's Dockside to Highway 12, the fish house became Chester Lynne's floral and antique shop, Annabelle's – now located on Back Road. Today the Working Ocracoke Waterman's Exhibit is located in the old store, and the docks are still the taking off point for charter boats and tours.

In 1990 The Ocracoke Historic District was listed
on the National Register of Historic Places.
Will Willis Store & Fish House is #23.

In November of 2013 The Ocracoke Foundation purchases the
Will Willis Store & Fish House to protect and preserve the
structure, history and to ensure public use.

Photos from top: 1) Willis Fish House prior to 1940, photo courtesy of Larry Williams Estate. 2) Lindsay Baum Howard 1962, photo courtesy of Rudy Austin. 3) Willis Store newspaper advertisement December 1941 Ocracoke Island Beacon, courtesy of The Ocracoke Library North Carolina & Local Archives Room.