

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY SQUARE



Almost a century after its 1918 founding, the Community Store remains a center of commerce and social activity in the heart of Ocracoke Village. Amasa 'Mace' Fulcher's grocery faced the harbor, appropriate for a business whose freight arrived by boat. Island men gathered on the porch to share stories, whittle birds and ponder the ways of fish. In winter months the congregation moved inside near the pot-bellied stove.

Around 1930 Captain Will Willis opened a store on an adjacent lot. The Willis Store was built on a pier jutting into Silver Lake and offered general merchandise; nearby fuel tanks provided kerosene and diesel. Both the Willis and Community Store docks had fish houses where fishermen unloaded their catch (photo below). The mailboat docked at the Willis Store for a time. The daily arrival of mail and goods is well-documented as an event of great conviviality that drew a majority of islanders from their homes. After Captain Willis' son Jack took over the business, in 1958, the building became a hub of charter fishing. The docks remain host to several local charter captains.

The square continued to grow when the island's first electric generating plant was built, facing the Community Store, in 1936. Ocracokers called it the 'ice plant' after the luxury for which it was most appreciated. Since a new plant was built elsewhere in the 1970s the 'old ice plant' has housed numerous successful commercial enterprises, including many firsts for the island: hardware, fudge and yogurt, kites and toys, boutique clothing. The detached former office building is home to Ocracoke's original surf shop.

In the early 1980s an historic island home was saved from demolition by developers and moved to the Community Square, finding new life as a gift and craft shop on the harbor's edge. All of the buildings, as well as the docks, in the Square are contributing structures in Ocracoke's National Historic District. These historic buildings have hosted square dances, performances by the island's amateur theater group, decades of Fourth of July parades, stories told by professionals and the well-seasoned islander, as well as more unique events like a 1980s party promoting in-line skating (knee pads were not provided).



The Community Store was a thriving grocery and an anchor to the square and businesses along the commercial waterfront. Relatives of the Fulcher family owned and ran the store until 1978. In the 1950s the sandy lane passing the store was paved, state run ferry service began bringing more visitors to the island, and a larger store, the current structure, was constructed on the same site. As Ocracoke made the transition from a subsistence coastal economy to a beloved vacation destination the porches faithfully served as meeting places for old-timers carving shore birds and barefoot children relishing ice cream and Pepsi-Colas.

The porches surrounding the square remain places where people gather to share jokes, gossip and more vital information: the Community Store bulletin board promotes events which invite people to participate in the life of the community: pot lucks, fund-raising fish fries, Civic and Business Club meetings. The chalkboard reliably informs islanders of shared joys (births, birthdays), triumphs and sorrows. Today the wooden rockers and benches welcome tourists and locals alike.

Written by Jenny Scarborough