

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Bald Head Creek Boathouse

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Bald Head Creek N/A not for publication

city or town Smith Island N/A vicinity

state North Carolina code NC county Brunswick code 019 zip code 28461

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State of Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.
 - See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
 - See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper _____

Date of Action _____

Bald Head Creek Boathouse
Name of Property

Brunswick County, NC
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

TRANSPORTATION/water related

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: frame boathouse

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation WOOD

walls WOOD/Shingle

WOOD

roof WOOD/Shingle

other WOOD

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Bald Head Creek Boathouse
Name of Property

Brunswick County, NC
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

MARITIME HISTORY

Period of Significance

ca. 1915-1937

Significant Dates

ca. 1915

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

U.S. Lighthouse Service

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 7 Page 1

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The ca. 1915 Bald Head Creek Boathouse is situated on Smith Island, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. The weathered, one-story, side-gabled structure is a lonely sentinel in the surrounding salt marshes that recalls the isolated lives of lighthouse keepers and coast guard personnel in the early decades of the twentieth century. Believed to have been built about 1915 for the United States Lighthouse Service, years of exposure to the harsh coastal atmosphere has scoured the building to a faded, weathered gray, making it seem a part of its natural surroundings. Smith Island is actually a complex of small islands with forested dune and beach ridges, salt marshes, and tidal bays and creeks.

From north to south, the three named islands of the Smith Island complex are Bluff, Middle, and Bald Head. Bald Head Creek is the southernmost tidal waterway on Smith Island and is located between Bald Head and Middle islands.

It begins near the coastal beach above Cape Fear and flows in a northwesterly direction into the Cape Fear River.¹

Built as a landing and transfer point for supplies which needed to be hauled from this point to the east end of the island, a distance of approximately 1.5 miles, the boathouse was constructed as far along the creek as possible while still allowing boat passage. It is presently located approximately mid-point along the northwest to southeast length of Bald Head Creek, but some eighty-four years ago, it was situated adjacent to the creek's south bank. Due to a southwardly migration of the creek, a common natural phenomenon in a salt marsh environment, the boathouse now rests slightly north of the meandering creek.

A simple single-craft, rectangular, frame, gable-roofed structure, the Bald Head Creek Boathouse rests on wooden pilings. The gable end boat entrance of the boathouse faces west, looking toward the Cape Fear River. The entrance is a simply framed opening, designed to allow broad-beamed, masted sloops

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 7 Page 2

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

access. Believed to have been built about 1915 for the United States Lighthouse Service, the rare maritime cultural artifact is part and parcel of surrounding salt marshes.

The boathouse originally included an exterior narrow walkway surrounding three sides, as well as a ramp extending from the boathouse to the bank of the creek. Centered on both the north and south sides of the building are door openings, providing access to the boathouse. The east gable end includes a window opening positioned in the center of the wall which originally contained a small six-paned fixed-sash window.

Constructed as a utilitarian structure by the United States Government, the design was practical and without ornamentation. Simple wood frames surround the door and window openings. While the exterior is clad with lap board siding, a straightforward interior reveals simple balloon frame construction. A narrow walkway runs the length of the interior on the north, east, and south sides, while a wood ladder descends from the middle of the north walkway. The gable roof features exposed rafters and purlins clad with cedar shake shingles. Original boat lifting machinery is still in place.

While the building has experienced some deterioration because of its environment, Bald Head Island Limited, a development company and current owner of the boathouse, plans to shore up the building by replacing deteriorated structural beams and pilings, as well as installing a new cedar shingle roof. The land south of the creek has been subdivided into single-family building lots. A private dock on the south bank of Bald Head Creek accesses the creek for these lots. Although not accessible to the public, the boathouse can be closely viewed by recreational boaters on the scenic creek and marshes, and admired from a distance from several vantage points along the banks of the creek.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 1

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The ca. 1915 Bald Head Creek Boathouse fulfills Criterion A for listing in the National Register as an extremely rare early twentieth-century structure associated with the maritime history of the Cape Fear region of North Carolina. The boathouse is historically associated with the Cape Fear Lighthouse Complex on Bald Head Island (NR 1978). Built around 1915 for the United States Lighthouse Service, the boathouse played an integral part in the lives of the people stationed on Bald Head Island. Located several miles closer to the lighthouse keepers' cottages than earlier landings, the boathouse served as a transfer point for goods and people from Bald Head Creek to the station. The boathouse and dock were also used by other residents of the island, including the crew and families of the United States Coast Guard Lifesaving Station. Standing as a lonely sentinel in the marsh grasses of Bald Head Creek, the boathouse serves as a visual reminder of early twentieth-century life on the island, when its primary human habitation consisted of lighthouse keepers and their families, and members of the United States Lifesaving Station, later known as the United States Coast Guard. As such, it is a stark contrast to the late twentieth-century golf-course-oriented, vacation-home developments that have overtaken much of the coastal Carolinas and Bald Head.

MARITIME HISTORY CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The ca. 1915 Bald Head Creek Boathouse is a structural marker in a long history of European settlement of the maritime Cape Fear region. It is a surviving member of a series of structures erected beginning in the late eighteenth century that signified efforts to provide safe ship passage in this treacherous stretch of the North Carolina coast. Like its preceding and contemporary companion structures, the boathouse is a straightforward expression of the elemental lives of lighthouse keepers and Coast Guard workers that reflects the maritime, salt marsh environment that shaped them.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 2

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

Smith Island has played a significant role in the maritime history of the Cape Fear region. Geographically, the island is situated between the mouth of the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean. Made up of a series of high areas and salt marshes, Smith Island is located a short distance below Federal Point on the mainland. The southern extremity of the island is a high area called Bald Head, a name sometimes used to identify the entire island. Its eastern and extreme southern tip is Cape Fear. Beyond the cape, Frying Pan Shoals projects southeasterly for some twenty miles forming a deadly subsurface hazard to shipping.²

Prior to 1720, the lower Cape Fear River area was inhabited primarily by Indians, pirates, and wildlife. One of the earliest land grants in North Carolina was issued by George Burrington, the English Governor of North Carolina, when on May 18, 1713, he conveyed the island to Landgrave Thomas Smith. After Governor Burrington made his first visit to North Carolina in 1724, he began issuing numerous land grants to encourage settlement of the area. Within two years, grants totalling more than 22,000 acres had been registered.³

Burrington's land grant policy brought rapid settlement to the lower Cape Fear; soon new plantations, communities and homesteads lined the banks of the Cape Fear River for over one hundred miles inland. Brunswick Town, located several miles upriver became the official port of entry for all Cape Fear shipping.⁴

Passage across the bar opposite Bald Head and through the river's nomadic channels was constantly fraught with difficulty. In 1784, the Colonial Assembly turned its attention to the matter of facilitating navigation of the river, and passed the Pilotage Act with provisions to mark the river entrances with buoys and beacons. The 1784 Act also recognized the need for a lighthouse at the main entrance to the river. Funds for its construction and maintenance

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 3

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

were to be derived from a tonnage tax which the law imposed on all vessels entering the river. General Benjamin Smith, the owner of Bald Head Island at that time, donated to North Carolina a ten-acre tract on the southwestern tip of the island for the light. Construction was already underway when, in 1790, North Carolina joined the United States and the site was transferred to the federal government. The federal government completed the lighthouse, and its light was ignited for the first time in December, 1794. Unfortunately, the site was ill-chosen and by 1813, the sea had encroached to the extent that the lighthouse had to be demolished.⁵

The bar was then without a light until 1818 when another was constructed further inland on the same island. By 1851, this single light had become a part of a system that included other lights at Federal Point, Orton Point, and Campbell Island as well as beacon lights on Oak Island and at Price's Creek.⁶

The replacement lighthouse became known as Old Baldy (NR 1975), and is the oldest lighthouse structure still standing on the North Carolina coast. An octagon-shaped lighthouse made of brick, it stands ninety feet from ground surface to the top of the building. A brick dwelling consisting of two rooms of equal dimensions with two attached shed rooms was constructed nearby the lighthouse for the keeper. The Old Baldy lighthouse was situated on a high bluff, about one-half mile north of the original lighthouse and several hundred feet back from the river.⁷

The natural formation of New Inlet above Smith's Island gradually became the primary shipping outlet for the Cape Fear River. Accordingly, a lighthouse was built at Federal Point, near New Inlet, thus relegating Old Baldy and the southern entrance to the Cape Fear River to a secondary status. Following the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, all of the coastal lighthouses in North Carolina, including those at New Inlet and Bald Head, were closed down by the Confederate forces.⁸

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 4

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

Old Baldy was relighted in 1880 after the Federal Point light was rendered useless as a result of a United States Corps of Engineer's project to improve the Cape Fear channel closed New Inlet. From 1881 to 1885 extensive jetty work was done to protect Old Baldy from the sea's encroachment. It was about this time that the Cape Fear Lifesaving Station became operational on Bald Head Island. Dunbard Davis, an experienced mariner and brother-in-law of Captain Sonny Doshier, the long-time keeper of Old Baldy Lighthouse, became the first keeper of the Cape Fear Lifesaving Station.⁹ The Cape Fear Lifesaving Station was located on the East Beach, about a mile north of Cape Fear and Frying Pan Shoals. The lifeboat station was manned with full crews for eight months each year from the first of September until the end of April. The keeper of the station was employed on a year-around basis, and was responsible for assembling a crew of volunteers if a shipwreck occurred during the summer season.¹⁰

The original Cape Fear Lifesaving Station on East Beach was a small, rectangular building with a large room on the ground floor in which equipment was stored and where the men cooked and ate. Their bunks and living quarters were in a smaller room on the second floor. Later, a considerably larger station was constructed and the original structure was converted to a boathouse, similar to the later Bald Head Creek Boathouse. In addition, several members of the lifesaving crew built their own homes nearby, thus forming a small self-contained community centered around the station above the Cape on the East Beach.¹¹

The Bald Head Island community was further enlarged in 1903 when a new lighthouse was put in service on the southeast point of the island. The federal government built three residences to house three lighthouse keepers and their families. This new lighthouse, known as Cape Fear Lighthouse, was a steel skeleton tower with an enclosed stair cylinder or inner tower. The tower was 150 feet high and had a radius of 18.5 miles of light which could reach out towards the Frying Pan Shoals.¹²

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 5

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

Prior to the construction of the Bald Head Creek Boathouse, supplies were normally unloaded at a landing near the site of the original 1790s lighthouse on the Cape Fear River. The distance from this landing to the new lighthouse was over three miles. Supplies were transported along a tramway, consisting of a flat car with metal wheels pulled by a team of mules over the wooden rails which were set on strong, light-wood cross ties. The tramway was put down during the construction of Cape Fear Lighthouse in 1903.¹³

The Cape Fear Lighthouse was set burning in 1903 by Captain Charlie Swan who tended the light for the next thirty years. He and his family lived on Bald Head Island during much of this time. He was helped by several assistants, who with their families, also lived most of the year on the island.

When erosion threatened the Life Saving Station on the East Beach, a new station was constructed on the protected South Beach, roughly halfway between Cape Point to the east and the Cape Fear River to the west. The construction of the station at the new location coincided with the formation of the U.S. Coast Guard through merger of the Life Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service. Work on the new station was started in 1914 and it was activated in 1915 as the Cape Fear Coast Guard Station. An excerpt dated April 2, 1913, from A Chronology of Southport (1887-1920) compiled by local historian, William Reeves, noted:

Because of erosion on Bald Head Island, it became necessary to either move the old or build a new life saving station further inland. Temporary quarters were to be built on Thompson's Hill, a high hill about half way between Cape Fear and the Old Bald Head Lighthouse. A boat house was to be erected on the river side of the island.¹⁴

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 6

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

This new complex of government buildings, including the lifesaving station, a cookhouse, and the new boathouse, was soon surrounded by the privately owned homes of the crewmen.¹⁵ Erected by the United States Lighthouse Service, ca. 1915, the boathouse facilitated the arrival of passengers and the transporting of goods to the Cape Fear Lighthouse keepers cottages, and to the relocated Coast Guard Station on the South Beach.

With the advent of modern navigational aids and the conversion of most coastal vessels from sail to motor power, there was a marked decline in the number of shipwrecks at Cape Fear. By 1937, the Coast Guard determined that there was no longer a need for the Cape Fear Station at Bald Head, as there was one directly across the river at Oak Island. After more than a half a century of continuous service by lifesavers on Smith Island, initially as the United States Lifesaving Station on the East Beach and then as the United States Coast Guard Station on the South Beach, the Cape Fear Station on Smith Island was deactivated.¹⁶

The Cape Fear Coast Guard Station was briefly placed back on active duty during World War II when the Coast Guard Horse Patrol was established to patrol the extensive Smith Island beaches on the lookout for German submarines and infiltrators. After the war, title to the Coast Guard property reverted to private ownership in the name of Frank Sherrill who made limited use of the station buildings. In 1968, the Cape Fear Coast Guard Station was destroyed by fire, and the private residences surrounding the station had over time been reduced to rubble.¹⁷

After more than fifty years service, the Cape Fear Lighthouse was abandoned when the Oak Island Lighthouse became operational on May 15, 1958. On September 12, 1958, the fifty-five year old tower was purposely toppled by two charges of dynamite.¹⁸ The three keepers cottages, a utility building, and the Bald Head Creek Boathouse were spared and were used briefly by the United States Coastguard. After standing vacant for a number of years, the cottages

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 8 Page 7

Bald Head Creek Boathouse Brunswick County, NC

were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 and have since been restored by the current developers of the island.

In 1963, the Federal property on the island, including the Bald Head Creek Boathouse, was sold to Frank Sherrill and consolidated into his Bald Head Island holdings. Currently, Bald Head Island Limited, owned by Kent Mitchell, is the development company of the island and owner of the boathouse.

The Bald Head Creek Boathouse is one of the few remaining buildings on Bald Head Island which serves as a reminder of the time when the island was a lonely outpost for lighthouse keepers and their families and a small group of lifesavers. Although its origins are somewhat obscure, evidence strongly indicates it was built by the United States Government ca. 1915, to facilitate the transportation of supplies to the Cape Fear Lighthouse complex on the southeast end of the island. It was also used by the Coast Guard when they relocated their station to the South Beach.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Bald Head Creek Boathouse
Brunswick County, NC

Section number 8 Page 8

ENDNOTES

1. Claude V. Jackson, III, The Cape Fear - Northeast Cape Fear Rivers Comprehensive Study; Vol 1 Maritime History. (North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1966), p. 67.
2. Lawrence Lee, The History of Brunswick County, North Carolina. (Brunswick County, North Carolina: 1978), p. 4.
3. David Stick, Bald Head: A History of Smith Island and Cape Fear, (Wendell, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1985), p. 23.
4. Stick, p. 25.
5. Lee, p. 115-116.
6. Lee, p. 116.
7. Ethel Herring, Cap'n Charlie and Lights of the Lower Cape Fear. (Winston Salem, NC; Hunter Publishing Co., 1967), p. 80-83.
8. Stick, p. 38.
9. Stick, p. 61.
10. Stick, p. 62.
11. Stick, p. 64.
12. Herring, p. 87.
13. Herring, p. 27.
14. William Reeves, Smithtown, A Chronology, Vol II (1887-1920). The Southport Historical Society, 1990), p.
15. Stick, p. 65.
16. Stick, p. 68.
17. Stick, p. 69.
18. Stick, p. 78.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Bald Head Creek Boathouse
Brunswick County, NC

Section number 9 Page 1

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Minutes of the Lighthouse Board on the Cape Fear Light-Station, N.C. from 1855-1907.

SECONDARY SOURCES

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Historic Places in Brunswick County. Brunswick County Planning Department, 1976.

History of Cape Fear Light, North Carolina. Recorded history by the U.S. Coast Guard, dtd. April 1950, located in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Bald Head Creek Boathouse
Brunswick County, NC

Section number 10 Page 1

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary for the Bald Head Creek Boathouse includes a 25-foot swath surrounding the perimeter of the boathouse.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boathouse is situated in Bald Head Creek, a body of water which is constantly shifting. The 25-foot swath around the boathouse includes a portion of the creek and marshland and provides an appropriate setting for the boathouse.

CAPE FEAR

Bald Head Creek Bathhouse

Brunswick County, NC

UTM ref: 18/223710/3750600

INTERIOR
VEY

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND ECONOMIC RESOURCES
RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA



