

Cape Lookout

National Seashore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Henry Piggot

“A People, A Place, A Community That Time Forgot.”

Today, as visitors stroll the empty lanes and paths of Portsmouth Village, it is hard to imagine that this ghost town was once a thriving community. This community consisted of boat captains, fishermen, lifesaving staff, doctors, and storekeepers.

This diversity of people made Portsmouth unique, not only because Portsmouth was an isolated hamlet, but also because the people’s character prevailed in an environment that was as unrelentingly harsh as it was wild.

Henry Pigott-the man and his life in Portsmouth.



One inhabitant was Henry Pigott, born May 5, 1896. His ancestors first came to Portsmouth as slaves. However, after the Civil War when most people of color left Portsmouth, Henry’s ancestors stayed and made it their home.

Henry’s grandmother, Rosa Abbot, was a jack of all trades. She was a midwife, doctor and nurse; she also worked in the gristmill, fished and oystered. Her daughter, Leah, had seven children: Ed, Ike, Henry, Mattie, Georgia, Rachel, and Elizabeth (Lizzie).

Henry and his sister Lizzie remained on Portsmouth for most of their lives, while their other

siblings, faced with the decreasing economy of Portsmouth, left to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Lizzie served as the town’s unofficial barber. Many people recall going “Down the Banks” to Lizzie’s for a haircut. While both Henry and Lizzie continued to fish and oyster for a living, Henry became the “mailman.” Henry would pole out to the mail boat, retrieve mail and passengers, and give the Captain of the mail boat a list of items needed from Ocracoke. (By this point in history, the economy of Portsmouth no longer supported a general store.) The items needed would either be brought back to Portsmouth via the mail boat or delivered by a resident of Ocracoke who was coming over to the village.

Henry’s House



At the mouth of Doctor’s Creek, there is a yellow house with a flagpole and a white picket fence. Harmon Austin, a carpenter from Ocracoke, built this home around 1902. In 1904, the house was sold to Rosa Abbot. The house was eventually passed down to Henry and Lizzie upon the death of their mother Leah.

Other than raising the house in 1932 to prevent flooding, it has remained unchanged since its construction. During the same

year, a summer kitchen and a cool house were added to the grounds of the Pigott property. In 1934, new buff (yellow) paint was ordered to repaint the house; however, the paint received was pink. Henry, feeling that it was too much trouble to return the paint, simply painted the house pink. The house remained pink until after his death. Henry sold his property in 1967 along with many other homeowners, to the State of North Carolina for the creation of Cape Lookout National Seashore. Henry retained a life estate to the house.

A Way of Life



A reporter from New York City once came to Portsmouth to write an article about the village. She was given a tour of the village, and was later introduced to Henry.

The reporter began to criticize the island lifestyle, telling Henry that

he was crazy to live among the mosquitoes with no electricity and no running water.

Pigott thought for a moment, then replied that he had done some traveling. He had been to New York City. He had even seen all the modern innovations. Then he paused and added, "And I'm not sure which one of us is crazy."

"Gone but not Forgotten"



In the 1860's, Hatteras Inlet opened to the north of Ocracoke Inlet. Hatteras Inlet was not as treacherous with transferred shoals as Ocracoke Inlet, thus most of the shipping shifted to Hatteras Inlet. Large ships off-loaded heavy cargo and transferred it to smaller boats which then transported the goods to the mainland. Since Portsmouth was, now, primarily a "lightering" port, it began to decline. This decline continued until the 1970's when Henry Pigott, the last male resident of Portsmouth Village, fell ill and died on January 5, 1971.

The notice in the local papers read: "Henry Pigott, the last

permanent male resident on Portsmouth Island died Tuesday. The funeral service was conducted at 10 a.m. Thursday in the Methodist Church on Portsmouth Island. Mr. Pigott was buried in the cemetery near the church." The epitaph on Henry's grave reads "Gone but not Forgotten."

Elma Dixon and Marion Babb, the remaining two inhabitants of Portsmouth, reluctantly left the island shortly after Henry died. Portsmouth-the community, the family, and the home-ceased to exist with the death of one man.

