

Roanoke River Lighthouse Moved Again

This Time It's Permanent

By Timothy Harrison

This past May, North Carolina's Roanoke River Lighthouse, the last standing screw-pile style of lighthouse in its original form in the state, was moved to its new home on the waterfront of Edenton, North Carolina.

Hundreds of spectators gathered to watch the lighthouse being moved for the third time in its history since it was originally built in 1887 in the waters of Albermarle Sound. As the onlookers glanced around at the crowd waiting to watch the move, one person

commented that it looked as if there were more people on hand than lived in the town. Another quipped in that there were more people there than lived in the entire county. Whatever the case, they all left with memories that will be shared with generations to follow. They witnessed the restored 58-ton Roanoke River Lighthouse being moved over rollers to its new home atop pilings in the water, just as it had been from 1887 until 1955 when it was barged to the mainland to become a private home.

The Roanoke River Light Station can be traced back to 1835 when a lightship was placed at the site. However, during the Civil War the lightship was removed from its location. After the war, the government authorized the construction of a new lighthouse in 1866. However, that structure was destroyed by ice in 1885. A new Roanoke River Lighthouse was built in 1886. That same year the lighthouse was damaged by ice and collapsed. It was rebuilt the following year. The Roanoke River Lighthouse operated until 1941 when it was discontinued and sat abandoned for about fifteen years.

In the mid 1950s the government decided that they wanted the abandoned Roanoke River Lighthouse, along with the Wade Point Lighthouse, near the Pasquotank River, and the Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse, near Roanoke Island, to be demolished or removed. Elijah Tate, a marine salvager, responded that he could remove all three lighthouses for \$10.00 each. The government accepted his offer with the stipulation that the lighthouses be removed by a specific date with a daily penalty fee being imposed for every day past that date. Unfortunately, Tate's attempt to move the two of the lighthouses met with disaster. As he was preparing their move, a storm struck the area, and the Wade Point and Roanoke Marshes lighthouses tipped over and sank.

Although accounts differ as to whether Tate then sold the Roanoke River Lighthouse to Emmitt Wiggins or simply gave it to him, but Wiggins ended up owning the structure and was subsequently successful at moving it to shore in what many said was an engineering feat unto itself. Wiggins reported that

Roanoke River Lighthouse move photos courtesy Kip Shaw. The lighthouse was moved by Waff Contracting, Inc and Worth H. Hare & Sons House Moving, Inc.



it took him 36 hours just to get the lighthouse onto a barge and then another 32 hours to move it across Albermarle Sound to the community of Edenton. If Wiggins had not moved the Roanoke River Lighthouse to the mainland, the historic structure would not be standing today.

Wiggins eventually made the lighthouse his permanent place of residence and lived in it until his death in 1995. Although the structure was then owned by Wiggins' son, who tried to sell the lighthouse, complications arose, and it sat virtually abandoned and was severely suffering from neglect. In the September, 2006 edition of *Lighthouse Digest* we added to the Roanoke River Lighthouse to Doomsday List of Endangered Lighthouses, along with a story about the lighthouse with photographs of the dilapidated structure.

In May of 2007, the Edenton Historical Commission, with the help of a state grant, purchased the lighthouse and moved it to a nearby park where it would await restoration. The story about the lighthouse being moved, with dramatic photos, appeared in the July, 2007 edition of *Lighthouse Digest*, and those photos can be seen in the *Lighthouse Digest* on-line archives. In 2008, ownership of the lighthouse changed again, when it was gifted to the State of North Carolina to be administered by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

While at Colonial Park, the exterior of the lighthouse was restored and was reported by us in the August, 2010 edition of *Lighthouse Digest*, which also included photos of the restoration work. This story can also be found in the on-line archives at www.LighthouseDigest.com.

Continued on next page.

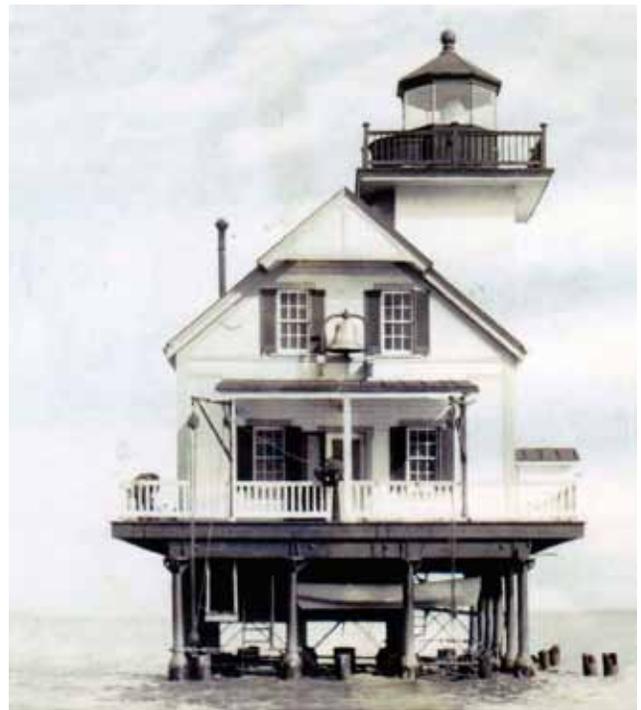


It was originally thought that the Roanoke River Lighthouse could remain at land; however complications arose and it was decided to put the lighthouse on pilings near the shore to show how it would have looked when it was out in Albermarle Sound. The lighthouse was moved to its new site on rollers that moved the structure about three feet at a time and was accomplished in less than a day's time.

However, the work is far from completed. The interior of the lighthouse still needs to be restored, which is now underway. The Edenton Historical Commission is soliciting donations of cash and period furnishings. Additionally, a public ramp will need to be built to allow public access to the lighthouse.



The 1901 fog bell from Roanoke River Lighthouse is now on display at the Queen Anne Park in Edenton, North Carolina. (Photo by Nancy Nichols.)



The Roanoke River Lighthouse as it appeared in 1914 in Albermarle Sound, North Carolina when it was still an active lighthouse station. (U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses photo, *Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



The Roanoke River Lighthouse just before being moved onto the pilings where it will rest over the water. (Photographs courtesy Gregg Nathan, Edenton Historical Commission.)



The only other known North Carolina screw-pile lighthouse still standing is the North River Lighthouse that was deactivated in 1917. The structure, minus its lantern room, was moved to Rodanthe, North Carolina and used as a school house. Later, with some slight alteration, it became a community center and is still in use today. However, the original structure is distinguishable from the addition added to it.





Roanoke River Lighthouse after its exterior restoration waiting to be moved to its new location on stilts over the water. (Photograph courtesy North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.)

The restored Roanoke River Lighthouse at its new location on the waterfront pilings in Edenton, North Carolina. (Photo by Kip Shaw)



Artist depiction of what the Roanoke River Lighthouse will look like once the public access ramp is installed. (Courtesy Chowan County Tourism Development Authority.)

Editor's Note: The Roanoke River Lighthouse is not to be confused with a replica of the 1866 Roanoke River Lighthouse that is now operated as a museum in Plymouth, North Carolina. Nor should it be confused with the no longer standing Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse that once stood in Croatan Sound or the replica of Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse on the waterfront near Manteo, North Carolina. All those involved over the years with helping to save, move, and restore the Roanoke River Lighthouse, especially the volunteers, are to be commended for their years of dedication to make this possible.

Our thanks go out to Nancy Nichols of the Chowan County Tourism Development Authority for her assistance with this story and a special thank you to Kip Shaw who shared with us the photographs on pages 54 & 55 of the lighthouse being moved.

Bass Harbor Lighthouse Braided Rug



FREE!
Bass Harbor
Lighthouse
Quarter with
rug purchase



Made of 99% jute, fire and mildew retardant, this 27" round design is perfect for your home.

#217 - Bass Harbor Rug - \$29.95

Also available as a 10" round place setting
#216 - Bass Harbor Place Setting - \$4.95 each
or a set of 4 for \$17.95

Plus shipping.



FogHorn Publishing
P.O. Box 250, East Machias, ME 04630
(207)259-2121 - www.FogHornPublishing.com
Free quarter available for a limited time only.