

Building in a Coastal Environment

A Personal History by *Jimbo Ward*

The first nail I ever drove professionally was in Manteo. Growing up in Virginia Beach, my first attraction to the Outer Banks was the surfing. But the only thing a person could do in the 70's to make a living here was bang nails or fish. I had already tried fishing and life on a trawl boat was far from pleasant. So, I started building houses in Burnside Forest under the direction of Tom Edwards, one of the finest carpenters I have ever worked with.

I later worked with a master carpenter from Edenton named Edgar Halsey who had been doing restoration work for the State of North Carolina. Today, I still adhere to the values he passed on to me in my first job: "Any job worth doing is worth doing the best you know how." The trick is to have the appropriate material to create the finish you want. Any time you buy less than the best you pay twice what you would have paid for the best in the long run. The same lesson applies to technique. These lessons hold true for the simple houses of the past just as much as they do for the palatial homes being built today.

One of the first houses I built under my own company, Beach Realty & Construction, was a little oceanfront saltbox in Kitty Hawk for Mrs. Elaine Eike, a former president of the Board of Realtors in the state of Virginia. She didn't want a big house but she wanted one built to last. Oceanfront structures are continually challenged by severe wind and erosion conditions, so to protect the integrity of the house we exceeded the code requirements for piling installation. For Elaine Eike's house, we increased the amount of pilings required, drop hammered them, a process which was almost unheard of in those days, and then added cross bracing to ensure stability. Mrs. Eike built a relatively inexpensive house even by yesterday's standards but economy didn't dictate sidestepping those structural items which really required attention. Because of that she has a structure that is still standing in an environment where others have already failed.

In the ten years between 1982 and 1992, design and construction on the Outer Banks had jumped in leaps and bounds in terms of size and complexity. Bob and Kathy D'Lauro were looking to build a 3600 sq.ft. home with a swimming pool on an oceanfront lot in Whalehead. Bob D'Lauro is the only businessman in a family of tradesmen, all of whom chipped in to help him select the right builder. In the end it was his father, a carpenter, who gave Beach Realty the nod of approval. His hands on experience enabled him to see beyond a glitzy sales presentation to the structure that was underneath. The relatively small depth of the oceanfront lot presented serious design challenges which were masterfully met by Rob Florez of Florez and Florez Design Group.

The D'Lauros wanted to incorporate an exciting design with all the features desired by vacation renters but without sacrificing the structural integrity of a home which might eventually be forced to face a critical storm situation. So, once again Beach Realty & Construction exceeded current building code and all the pilings were set a minimum of sixteen feet down and settled with a mechanical drop hammer. We created a structural situation where all the living and storage space on the ground level was completely independent of the structural integrity of the rest of the house. Should water wash away the ground floor, the rest of the structure would still be standing.

While I continue to emphasize taking the extra steps to ensure integrity, I see a distressing trend. People are willing to slip behind the environmental setback line so they can get away with shortcutting traditional construction. This has given rise to a whole construction trend of building oceanfront houses on monolithic slabs, thus putting the entire structure at potential risk since the 100 year flood line is only a few feet away from the slab. Quite often people are willing to trade off structural integrity for amenities and special features they might otherwise not be able to afford. What a shame.

We live in a beautiful area surrounded by water, and we need to take that water seriously as well as enjoy it. The need to take precautions holds true for soundfront construction just as it does for the oceanfront. Sanderling, a pristine development stretching from the ocean to the sound, is subject to soundside flooding in extreme situations. The Halloween Storm of 1993 validated Beach Realty & Construction's strong recommendation that homeowners bulkhead any ground level construction in addition to building on driven pilings. After that storm, Beach Realty went into several areas of the Outer Banks and repaired ground floor construction using a specialized pressurized concrete method. I also reinforced the actual perimeter of soundfront homes with structural bulkheading to save the homeowners from recurring damage.

Today, all of my homeowners recognize the validity of protecting ground floor construction in areas of potential flooding with bulkheading integral to the structure of the home.

As subdivisions build out, the remaining lots often inherit site problems. Frank and Nancy Karkuff of Corolla Light were greeted with eight to ten inches of standing water on their newly purchased lot after a heavy rain. They did not agree with the Corolla Light Homeowners Association initial recommendation that they fill only under the general area of the house. A meeting between the Karkuffs, Beach Realty, representatives from CAMA and the Corolla Light Homeowners Association resulted in the design of a drainage plan which benefited not only the Karkuff's but that entire section of Corolla Light.

It is typical of Beach Realty to resolve a problem with the long run in mind, rather than just putting up another house for the immediate profit. In spite of the initial drainage dilemma, Frank Karkuff writes, "I've built four houses but this was without a doubt the easiest and the best."

In the final analysis, you are going to get what you pay for! And in an environment like the Outer Banks, if you do not buy experience, integrity, and attention to detail, you will ultimately pay the price.

**After over thirty years of building on the Outer Banks,
I'm still here and so are all of my houses. *Jimbo Ward***

Courtesy of Beach Realty & Construction