



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

September 1, 2016

The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but no vision.
~ Helen Keller

For a Smidgeon of Vision

An icon of the Cape Fear, along with Old Baldy and the Oak Island Light, has long been the *Frying Pan* lightship. A favorite of artists and photographers, we see the image hanging in every local gallery. But the real thing is gone.

Where'd it go? It had been on station 20 miles south of Bald Head Island on Frying Pan shoal since 1930. It was replaced by a fixed tower in 1965. Then what?

In 1967, the Coast Guard donated the ship to the City of Southport. A group of visionary citizens quickly organized to raise money, restore the ship and give it a home at the foot of Howe Street. The people at Sunny Point helped dredge a berth and construct a pier, with a ticket booth for visitors. It was a successful tourist attraction from the start. Why isn't it there now?

Why indeed? Because the City of Southport sold it in 1984. We don't know why. Well, it was just an old ship. Historic value, part of the heritage of the region, phooey.

The buyer took it to a berth on the Wicomico River off of Chesapeake Bay, but let it settle to the bottom and capsize. Then someone with vision bought it in 1989 and took it to New York harbor and partially restored it for use as a bar. It is now at pier 66 on the Hudson River, a popular tourist spot, and, ahem, on the National Register of Historic Places. One of 13 remaining of 100 such ships.

Now the City has a chance to make amends to posterity for this sad mistake. In 2001, Price's Creek light, the abandoned lighthouse we see from the Fort Fisher ferry, was offered to the City by Archer Daniels Midland, on whose property it sits. That old building is one of the oldest lighthouses in the country, first lit in 1851 as the front light of range lights to guide mariners through New Inlet. It was extinguished in 1863 so the Union blockaders could not use it, but not relit because New Inlet was closed. The rear light was on top of the keeper's house. That fell into disrepair and the bricks went missing. Legend has it that a ferryboat captain nabbed them to build his house in Southport.

The Board of Aldermen appointed a task force in April 2001 to consider the ADM offer, but no report was ever delivered. The offer remains outstanding. Now, 15 years later, we have new faces on the Board. Perhaps they will turn and look at the City seal hanging behind and above them. That seal depicts a lighthouse. What lighthouse? Is it the Price's Creek light? What else could it be?

Is there anyone among our new cadre of City officials with the vision to resume the conversation with ADM and develop a plan to save the light? We think so. Perhaps that part of the Cape Fear's heritage will be saved!

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