

Amspacher, Karen Willis: Harkers Island Ends Here ^[1]

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Karen Willis Amspacher: Harkers Island ends here

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/14/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

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I often visit Karen Willis Amspacher on Harkers Island, east of Beaufort. Karen is one of the nation's leading authorities on America's maritime heritage. She also has deep roots on Harkers Island. A century ago, her great-grandfather, William Henry Guthrie, floated his home there after the great storm of 1899 devastated Diamond City, a fishing village on Shackleford Banks.

Guthrie and others from "the Banks" continued fishing and boatbuilding on Harkers Island. They were a close-knit, God-fearing, fiercely independent community. Without a bridge to the mainland until 1941, the islanders grew legendary for their traditional wooden boats and a distinctive way of talking that reminds many people of Elizabethan English.

This visit, though, instead of wooden boats or antique decoys, Karen showed me something else: The island is awash in surveyor's tape and "for sale" signs. Developers have bought even many of the island's most revered landmarks, such as Academy Field and the Sand Hole. The old Harkers Island suddenly seems to be vanishing. Karen was on the edge of tears -- and anger.

We drove around the island and talked.



Karen Willis Amspacher. Photo by Chuck Liddy, 2006. To request permission to use this photograph, please contact the *News & Observer*.

This is the last fish house on Harkers Island. It closed six weeks ago. It was originally Henry Davis'. I used to come down here with Daddy. That's where we went after supper nights. They had a wooden dock with this big, long wooden table on this harbor up here, where the commercial fishermen used to be, is now empty. That house will be gone soon. There are some more local people there who are selling. Right there, he'll sell you his boat too. This here used to be a clam house, fish house and Wallace Garner's trailer park. These trailers, as humble as they are, housed about 150 older folks. These people were run out last November. They're putting in for a permit to dredge the harbor. They've also developed this side of Ferry Dock Road, 28 lots already all sold out. Here is our stormwater runoff plan: a ditch to the sound. How they got a permit that close to active shellfish, I want to know. The other side backs up to the community cemetery behind the Methodist church. The cemetery is going to get the drain. Here's their sewage system, next to the cemetery. There is no respect, David. These lots are resales. These are people that bought lots and now are reselling them. They've bought it on speculation. They're flipping it. Now, that house right there, they had been here forever. Somebody walked up and offered them \$268,000, I think it was. It happened all of a sudden. A sign never hit the yard or nothing. Shocked everybody to death.

This is John's Creek. That's where we played. These are local people right here. That's Lib Brooks' mama and daddy. That's Lib. That's Miss Edna Earl's. And then you start this Harkers Village development and that is the end of Harkers Island. The homes are a million dollars. It's a weekend community. I think there are four or five children in the whole neighborhood that live here full time. We had friends that used to live here. Their neighbors were sitting on their deck one day, the doorbell rang, and it was some people out looking for homes. Before the day was over, they had sold it for \$850,000, furnished, the boat, guns, feathers. I met somebody the other day. He said, "My parents live at Harkers Island." I said, "Where?" He said, "Harkers Village." I said, "No, they don't."

When Uncle Stacy's land was sold, that hit me hard. See, Uncle Stacy's house had come from the banks. He was a powerful man, he really was, and just flat-out smart. He was the oldest one in the family, very well respected, the patriarch figure. Uncle Stacy was like this living monument to Banks history, and I used to go over there. He loved brownies, so I'd bake brownies, especially Christmas, and Mama made tater pies. If we were cooking fish, we'd take some to him. He was just He died -- it was time; he was 96 or something -- but his house stood there. Then it wasn't long, nobody was living there, so they took the house down. I cried that day. Then his grandson Joseph died a couple of years ago, and the rest of the family had all moved away. It was just such a symbol, the family selling that piece of land. It was kind of like selling the church. It would not have been any more out of But they had the right. It was nothing wrong. It was just what it symbolized. And that was in the midst of that wildfire of buying and selling. Mama said, "Well, who is going to sell this week?" There was about two months there, and it was like that. But it was what it stood for. All of a sudden, everything has become a commodity. That's the change. And the fact that Stacy Guthrie -- they couldn't have printed enough money to have bought that piece of land from him.

I don't know what the answer is. What are our choices? We either sit back and live with what is done to us or we try to make a difference. I believe we can make a difference. Change is going to come. We know that. William Henry Guthrie knew. He was a wise man. After that storm in 1899, he understood that he had to adjust to survive, and he took the time to find a way to move forward without sacrificing who he was, what he was made of, who his people would become. Now I worry

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[Cecelski, David S.](#) ^[6]

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