

Wales, Charles: Always a Little Music ^[1]

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Charles Wales: Always a Little Music

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 6/11/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Charles Wales has been going to Nags Head all his life. Born and raised in Edenton, he spent the summers of his youth there on the Outer Banks in a time before electricity and running water, when there weren't even roads, much less bridges to the mainland.

Located in the shadow of Jockey's Ridge, the highest sand dune on the Atlantic coast, Nags Head has been a beach retreat since the 1830s. Originally a gathering place for Albemarle Sound planters escaping the heat and malaria of lowcountry summers, Nags Head remained a popular destination after the Civil War. His wife Margaret's family - the Winsteads of Windsor, N.C. - have owned a cottage there since 1875.

Nags Head changed irrevocably when the first bridge was built to the Outer Banks in 1929. Now it's a crowded, world-famous resort. Wales barely recognizes the rough-hewn little village of shingled cottages from his youth, but he has never forgotten the sweetness of those summers long ago.



Charles Wales. Photo by Chris Seward, 2000. To request permission for Charles Wales to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I first went to Nags Head when I was 3 months old - 1916. Mother took me down that way for the entire summer. When you went to Nags Head in those days, you went for the entire summer, most of the people did. Everybody knew everybody. Today, you can get in an automobile in Edenton and be there in less than two hours. In those days, it was an all-day trip. We'd take a train on over to Elizabeth City, and we'd take a steamer, the Trenton, down to Nags Head. All our things were in the real early 1920s, there were about 25 cottages on the ocean side, and they were all facing the sea. There were about an equal number of cottages over on the sound side. On the ocean side, the Arlington Hotel was down at the south end. Then, on the sound side, there was a good-sized hotel, operated by Graham Hollowell, which was at the end of the pier. Leading off of that, at the sound end of it, was a dock where the Trenton tied up when it came in from Elizabeth City and All of the cottages were shingled, side shingles and roof shingles. They were all on stilts, posts, so the water from the winter storms could rush back underneath them and cause no damage. Around the bottom, there was a piece of timber that there were a lot of cattle and sheep and hogs and ponies, all loose. I think a lot of these cattle belonged to Mrs. Hollowell, whose husband ran the hotel. They were a steady supply of milk to us during the summer. The cows would be driven to the piggery. The pigs followed sort of a routine going from one cottage to the next cottage picking up any scraps that might have been thrown out the window. That's what we did - we knew hogs would eat it! There were four grocery stores on the sound side, and the grocers would come around early in the morning and take orders. Then they'd go back to their stores on the horse and cart and fill all those orders and put each one in a little cardboard box. The people from up in the Nags Head Woods and even farther north than that would bring fresh vegetables and in some cases a few fruits - watermelons, cantaloupes, peaches, figs. Ice came over every morning on the Trenton from the ice factory. They'd set fish nets right out in front of the cottage. They'd set them out there in the evening and let them sit out there overnight. Some of the fishermen were from Nags Head Woods, but the Midgettes, particularly, were from over on the sound side. The people would have observed them setting the nets, so they'd know there was going to be a seine haul the next morning. They would gather down there with dishpans to get the fish they wanted to buy, and to help, always, with pulling in the net. The pavilion was just a bit south of the Hollowells' hotel. It was just a big square building, open to a high degree, and it was up on posts and had a walkway entirely around it, except on the back. They had dances there almost nightly. Whoever was on Wednesday night, they'd get a man who was a fisherman from up in the Nags Head Woods to come down and play his accordion and call figures for a square dance! His name was John Culpepper. All the members of the band who were on Sundays, a boat named the Annie L. Van Sciver ran an excursion from Elizabeth City to Nags Head. A string band would play on the way down and pass the hat. Once the Van Sciver landed, they would go around to every cottage on the sound side. At each house, they'd announce their presence on the front porch by, "Would you care for a little music?" And of course we would always care for a little music. They had a fiddle, bass and a banjo, and one instrument I remember very particular. I get back maybe once or twice a summer. With one or two rare exceptions, a lot of these people I have mentioned to you are no longer. Mr. and Mrs. Culpepper, they're no longer there. The people who ran those four groceries on the sound side, the pavilion is gone. Hollowell's store was moved over to the beach and it's gone. The grocery stores have all been replaced by supermarkets. But I can still see a lot of the things there I love still, and Jockey's Ridge is still holding forth.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for a change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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