

# Library Service to the Strands: North Carolina's Lighthouse Libraries

by Margaretta J. Yarborough

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, certain libraries along the North Carolina coast gave new meaning to the words "light reading." Instead of occupying buildings designed for the purpose, these libraries were housed in small portable trunks. Circulation of materials was supervised by men with no training in library management. The books and magazines, nonetheless, reached a large portion of their targeted audience and were so heavily circulated that disintegration from overuse was common. The trunks' destinations were the lighthouses, lifesaving stations, and lightships of the United States Lighthouse Service.

Library service to lighthouses began in 1876 when the U.S. Lighthouse Board first undertook to distribute small book and periodicals collections to isolated posts and vessels.

Envisioned as rotating libraries, these collections were to be exchanged every six months and to provide reading material suited both to keepers and to their families. The number of libraries increased rapidly: the first year saw fifty collections, and a hundred more were circulating two years later. Ten years after library collections began 420 were in circulation, with rotations usually taking place during quarterly inspections.<sup>1</sup> Composed largely of novels and adventure fiction, the collections also contained a liberal sprinkling of history, biography, and technical materials. Library collections traveled from station to station in small trunks made to specification by carpenters in the Lighthouse Service and described in detail by the lighthouse commissioner in 1920: "The traveling book cases in use in the Lighthouse Service are two feet square by nine and one-half inches deep, made of wood, with dovetailed ends, paneled back, and two paneled doors with strap hinges and strong lock. The two hinge straps are continued across the back and are each in one piece. The back corners of the case are protected by metal corner pieces. Two metal drop handles for lifting and carrying are secured to the sides."<sup>2</sup>

Lighthouses had existed in North Carolina since the late eighteenth century: the Bald Head Lighthouse was built in 1796 and those at Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke in 1798. Until the mid-nineteenth century, lighthouses were administered first by the

Secretary of the Treasury Department and subsequently by the Fifth Auditor of the Treasury. In 1852 the U.S. Lighthouse Board was formed. It continued through the transfer of the Lighthouse Service to the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1903 and was replaced by the Bureau of Lighthouses in 1910. The Bureau administered the Lighthouse Service until the Coast Guard assumed responsibility in 1939.

For administrative purposes North Carolina's light stations fell primarily into the Fifth District, which extended from Fenwick Island on the Delaware coast to New River Inlet in Onslow County, North Carolina. Fifth District headquarters were in Baltimore, Maryland. The remaining portion of the North Carolina coast was administered by the Sixth District, extending to

Hillsboro Inlet in Florida, with headquarters in Charleston, South Carolina. By 1912, when the Lighthouse Bureau began a close examination of existing lighthouse libraries, North Carolina had twenty-one stations and vessels receiving rotating collections in the Fifth District and three in the Sixth.

In an effort to overhaul existing libraries, Commissioner of Lighthouses G. R. Putnam attempted in 1912 to decrease their number but increase their quality. He instructed lighthouse inspectors that "Libraries will in future be supplied only to isolated stations where newspapers and current periodicals cannot readily be obtained, and to such stations only in case the keepers desire the library."<sup>4</sup> Because periodical literature had become less expensive and means of communi-

cation had improved, lighthouse libraries were not seen to be as crucial as in earlier days. In response to Putnam's directives, some districts requested fewer libraries: the Third District, for example, with 129 stations and vessels, requested a decrease from 127 libraries to 20. The Fifth District, however, with 107 stations and vessels, actually requested an increase from 103 to 105 libraries.

Putnam also solicited lists of appropriate books, for both adults and children from various sources. Among them were the Buffalo Public Library and George Bowerman of the District of Columbia Public Library, to whom he wrote:

In connection with making these small libraries really useful for the purpose it is desired to get up some sample lists of books so that the Lighthouse Inspectors in revising libraries will be guided thereby. ... What I want is to get from four to six lists of 30 books



Rotating library collections provided entertainment and education for men and their families at isolated stations like the Currituck Beach lighthouse at Corolla. (Photo courtesy N. C. Collection, UNC-CH.)

each, suitable in character for the keepers of remote lighthouses and the crews of light vessels. We do not want to furnish any trashy literature, nor do we want to furnish books that are above the heads of the people for whom they are intended.<sup>5</sup>

Bowerman complied with the spirit of the request, supplying six lists of exactly thirty books each comprised chiefly of classic yarns by the likes of Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Zane Grey, but also including some history and biography such as Woodrow Wilson's "Life of George Washington," and a smattering of poetry. A list of thirty children's books was compiled by the head of the District of Columbia library's children's department, and Bowerman also sent circulars of the Appleton's Boys Library and the Every Boy's Library, a list of books compiled for the Boy Scouts.<sup>6</sup>

Renewal of the Fifth District's many libraries continued throughout the teens. In 1916 the district's inspector requested purchase of twelve hundred new books, "to use the same together with books that are still servicable [sic] to make up about sixty (60) libraries."<sup>7</sup> The actual expenditure was \$564.46, covering 1,024 books. Given the Fifth District's unusual size, standard practice was abandoned and the Inspector was allowed to purchase two copies of each item.

Despite efforts to secure funding, monies for the upkeep of library collections had dwindled sharply by the late teens, nearly fifty years after the Lighthouse Board began distributing them. "The Lighthouse Service has no special appropriation for providing these books," wrote Commissioner Putnam in 1919, "and has not, on account of other urgent demands, been able to devote much of its funds to this purpose."<sup>8</sup> At this point the Library War Service Committee of the American Library Association (ALA) offered to distribute to light stations and lightships books left over from their work with the armed services during World War I.

ALA's active involvement began in 1919 with a one-time emergency shipment of five hundred books to the superintendent of lighthouses in Milwaukee. Soon, however, ALA had authorized the Lighthouse Section of its Merchant Marine Department to "overhaul the libraries now in the lighthouse service and to replace old books with up to date books of all kinds."<sup>9</sup> Forrest B. Spaulding, Assistant to the ALA Director, directed the refurbishment of lighthouse libraries, which was completed in 1920. Spaulding wrote Putnam that he considered it "... wise to let the district superintendents take the initiative in calling upon us so that there will be no thought among your people that we are forcing our service upon any of them."<sup>10</sup> Special consideration was given to extremely isolated stations and stations where children lived, and distinctions were made for stations with opportunities for gardens and those with large stocks of mechanical equipment.<sup>11</sup>

ALA moved with admirable efficiency, upgrading in less than a year libraries in all districts except those of inland rivers. By August 1, 1920, cases for the Fifth and Sixth Districts were partially filled at district depots, awaiting the arrival of supplementary fiction from New York. When ALA completed and turned over its library work to the Bureau of Lighthouses on October 15, it had assembled thirty-eight cases for the Fifth District and thirty for the Sixth, with an average of thirty-five books in each. In addition, small technical libraries of fewer than one hundred books were left at the district depots in Portsmouth, Virginia, and Charleston, South Carolina. The ten lightships in the Fifth District each received a library case containing eighty books. In all, ALA delivered 2,185 books to the Fifth District and 1,147 to the Sixth.<sup>12</sup>

Improvements to the library collections came from many sources and occasionally were initiated from within the lighthouse service itself. A move to furnish dictionaries to light stations was begun at the 1916 Conference of Lighthouse Inspectors, with the result that the Bureau approved the purchase of eighty dictionaries, to be distributed as individual districts saw fit, but with preference given to isolated stations, lightships, and stations with children. Dictionary purchases were made possible by excess funds: "As there may be some balance in Contingent fund allotment to use up this year, consideration might be given to procuring a certain number of dictionaries, ... after providing such furniture, etc., as Bureau desires, no charge being made to districts for dictionaries so purchased."<sup>13</sup> Of the ten light stations and vessels of the Fifth District which received dictionaries, six were located in North Carolina: Diamond Shoal Light Vessel No. 71, Cape Lookout Shoals Light Vessel No. 80, and the light stations at Bodie Island, Cape Hatteras, Cape Lookout, and Currituck Beach. In the Sixth District, the only North Carolina station recommended was the Cape Fear Light Station, but it failed to be approved.

From time to time the Lighthouse Service libraries became the focus of goodwill from assorted individuals and organizations. In the late 1920s, the American Dickens League seized upon the idea of establishing "Captain Cuttle libraries," collections of Dickens's works which the league destined for lighthouses and lifesaving stations and named after the character in *Dombey and Son*. The Dickens proponents pursued their goal with singular, if perhaps unrealistic, zeal: Mortimer Kaphan, founder of the American Dickens League, inquired of the commissioner of lighthouses, "Who would be more interested in the jolly seafaring Captain Cuttle than our own sailors? Books that describe their own lives, spoke their own language."<sup>14</sup> The league mounted appeals for old copies and partial sets of Dickens with some success. Kaphan wrote Commissioner Putnam

### Those Old Dickens Books?

(Or books by other authors)

Send them as gifts to  
**THE CAPTAIN CUTTLE  
LIBRARIES**

For the benefit of seamen, at light-  
houses and life-saving stations

**AMERICAN  
DICKENS LEAGUE**

1425 BROADWAY, N. Y.  
Metropolitan Opera House Building  
Telephone Langacre 3927

Join the American Dickens League

(This space donated by a friend)

Appeals for book contributions targeted groups such as New York City theatergoers. (*Advertisement from unidentified playbill, Record Grp. 26, National Archives.*)

#### TABLE: Lighthouse Service Libraries Existing in North Carolina in 1912

##### Fifth District

Bluff Shoal  
Bodie Island  
Brant Island Shoal  
Cape Hatteras  
Cape Lookout  
Croatan  
Currituck Beach  
Harbor Island Bar  
Hatteras Inlet  
Laurel Point  
Long Shoal  
Neuse River  
North River  
Ocracoke  
Pamlico Point  
Roanoke Marshes  
Roanoke River  
Southwest Point Royal Shoal  
Wade Point  
Cape Lookout Shoals Light Vessel No. 80  
Diamond Shoal Light Vessel No. 71

##### Sixth District

Cape Fear  
Frying Pan Shoals Light Vessel No. 1  
Brunswick Light Vessel No. 84<sup>3</sup>

that he had "... been making appeals for the past twenty weeks over many radio stations in connection with the Captain Cuttle Library work, giving in return to their audiences my Dickens characterizations."<sup>15</sup> Putnam directed Kaphan to the superintendents of the various lighthouse districts and made arrangements for forwarding the collections with the Third District's superintendent at Staten Island. At least two distributions of Captain Cuttle libraries were made, for records show the receipt on June 20, 1929, of a package of books destined for the Cape Fear Lighthouse at Southport, followed on February 13, 1930, by four packages for the same location. Although records give no indication of any Captain Cuttle libraries sent to the Fifth District, the Sixth District received a large share of the Dickens collections distributed along the Atlantic Coast.<sup>16</sup>

Service at an isolated station was no safeguard against missionary fervor on the part of various religious organizations. In October 1921 the Lighthouse Bureau, at the request of the Home Missionary Department of the Seventh Day Adventists, supplied a list of lighthouse superintendents. This practice managed to curb some overzealous groups, by requiring them to correspond with superintendents rather than directly with lighthouse personnel. A note of frustration may be seen in a letter from the Moody Bible Institute, which protested that the lighthouse service should cooperate since the Institute's "general purpose ... [was] to help men and women in a moral and spiritual, and in some cases recreational service."<sup>17</sup> No further correspondence seems to have been received after the commissioner of lighthouses informed the Institute that, "This office does not maintain a general mailing list of lighthouse keepers, and under the policy of the Department it is not authorized to furnish such lists outside of official circles. It

is customary, in the case of approved communications, for these to be sent to keepers through the Superintendents of the districts in which their stations are located."<sup>18</sup>

In 1923, the lighthouse service came under the scrutiny of the New York Bible Society: "We have just furnished Bibles for the ships of the United States Shipping Board, Emergency Fleet Corporation, and our attention has been called to the fact that we should make a similar offer to furnish Bibles for all Lighthouses along the Atlantic coast."<sup>19</sup> Upon receipt of a list of existing lighthouses, the Society had a requisite number of Bibles lettered "United States Lighthouse Service" and mailed them to all Atlantic district superintendents, to be placed in individual lighthouses. An additional Bible was lettered with Commissioner Putnam's name and sent to him. Six years later, the New York Bible Society repeated its offer and distributed an additional 388 Bibles to the Lighthouse Service, with Commissioner Putnam again receiving a personal copy. The Roanoke River Light Station was listed as the only station in North Carolina lacking a Bible at that time, and the omission was corrected.<sup>20</sup>

Material was also provided to selected lighthouses by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society. In early 1923 the Smithsonian made arrangements to mail recent and subsequent issues of its annual report to the superintendents of lighthouses, for distribution among lighthouse stations as they saw fit. The mailings continued at least until the late 1930s, for in 1937 the Smithsonian Institution sought to reduce the numbers of issues if they were no longer needed. While the Fifth District's annual reports were reduced from nine to four copies, H. L. Beck, the Sixth District's superintendent of lighthouses, expressed continued interest in the Smithsonian's reports: "It is

believed that they are particularly interesting to the personnel on vessels of the Lighthouse Service, although it is possible that some of the keepers find many of the articles too technical or profound for their comprehension ...."<sup>21</sup>

In 1936, the National Geographic Society undertook to provide free copies of its monthly magazine to lighthouse stations and to lightships. The Society first offered to

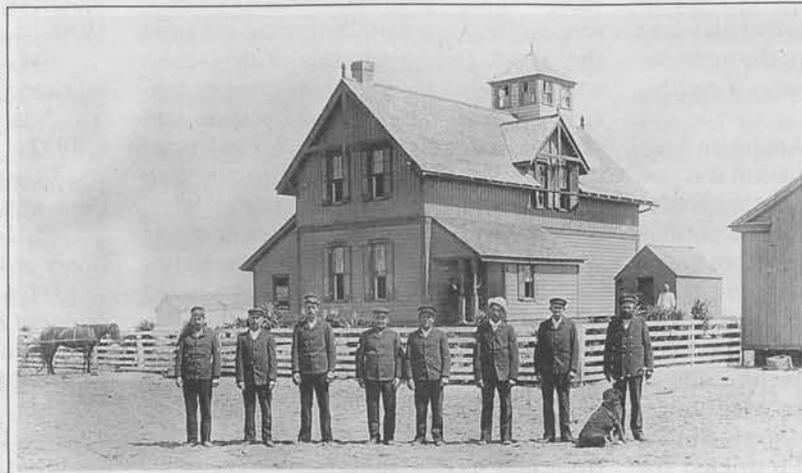
send a copy to every individual in the service, but, upon discovering that there were 1,175 keepers at 529 stations (not including lightships), the proposed number was whittled down to 200. The Bureau of Lighthouses conducted a survey to determine the most useful allotment, with preference given to "most of the lightships, except possibly Relief Ships, and then the isolated stations."<sup>22</sup> In the Sixth District, *National Geographic* subscriptions were sent to the Frying Pan Shoals Lightship No. 115 and to the Cape Fear Lightstation at Southport. In the Fifth District, the Diamond Shoals Lightship received a subscription.

The idea of improving reading matter available to lighthouse keepers and their families also appealed to various individuals. The Fifth District benefited from the generosity of Mrs. H. C. Graef of Washington, D.C., who during the late 1920s left magazines at the Lighthouse Bureau's office for distribution to the service. In

Pictured right:

Men such as these at the Cape Hatteras Life Saving Station benefited from the Lighthouse Bureau's library distribution program.

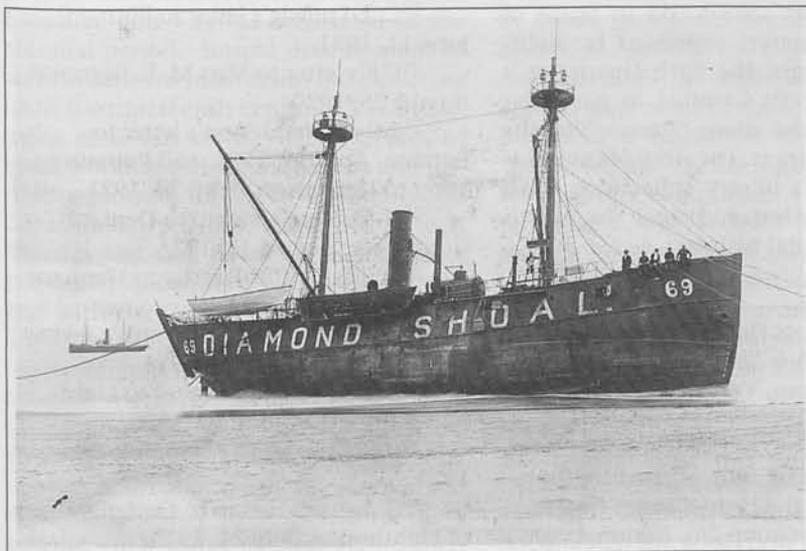
(Photo N.C. Collection, UNC-CH.)



Below:

Diamond Shoal Lightship No. 69 and similar vessels rotated their library collections at prescribed intervals.

(Photo N.C. Collection, UNC-CH.)



the early 1930s she began adding books as well, all of which were sent to the Fifth District. By mid-1931, Mrs. Graef's contributions outstripped the Fifth District's ability to absorb them, and the excess was directed to the Sixteenth District on the Northwest coast.<sup>23</sup>

Some persons were eager for specific books to reach the lighthouse stations. Miss M. E. Reynolds of Yonkers, New York, urged the distribution of the journal *Littell's Living Age* in 1920, but was informed by the commissioner of lighthouses that "it is not felt that these volumes will be of sufficient interest to lightkeepers to justify sending them."<sup>24</sup> Nor were civilians the only parties whose book suggestions were denied: Commander Robert Henderson of the U.S. Navy wrote Commissioner Putnam in 1921 to recommend a recent book: "Admiral Gleaves' book is written in narrative form and tells of the wonderful achievement of transporting all our troops to Europe and returning them without the loss of a soldier." Putnam replied that "the needs of the small lighthouse libraries were recently supplied by the American Library Association. When there is occasion to make further additions to them, your suggestion will be given consideration."<sup>25</sup> William Elmer, a superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad System, was more successful in donating books from his library: half of his books went to the Fifth District "for the improvement and extension of libraries if suitable for the purpose."<sup>26</sup>

Louise Griffith of the American Merchant Marine Library Association was particularly interested in distributing twelve copies of Archie Binns's novel *Lightship*: "Mr. Binns got his inspiration from a nine month's [sic] sojourn aboard the *Lightship* off Umatilla Reef, near Cape Flattery, Washington. From the title I assume you may have thought it was a technical book instead of a study in human relations."<sup>27</sup> W. P. Harman of the Lighthouse Bureau approved of the idea, but restricted the novel to men on lightships because of concern over the "violence" of the book's language: "The book would doubtless be of interest to anyone in the Lighthouse Service, particularly the crews of vessels and the keepers. There is some doubt, however, as to its suitability for young persons, into whose hands it might frequently fall, if sent to light stations where families are quartered."<sup>28</sup>

The Lighthouse Service also dealt with the occasional irate bibliophile, as in the case of George J. Foran, who in 1920 purchased a used copy of *George Washington Day by Day* and made an unhappy discovery:

"The Lighthouse Department book plate was in the front of the book with a rubber stamp across the face 'condemned' .... As a student of

Washington and a collector of Washingtonia, I was quite a little bit shocked to find a book of this great interest and value, evidently given to your department, for sale in a second-hand store, stamped 'condemned'. This certainly is a type of book that it would seem would have been of interest in any of the the libraries of the department, and one which would contribute towards the patriotism of the members of the department."<sup>29</sup>

Foran was probably less than mollified by the response he received: "Books, when not longer needed, are condemned and sold from time to time by the various Superintendents of Lighthouses, and it would appear that this particular book was disposed of in this manner."<sup>30</sup> Although the book in question was sold in Boston, it appears that procedures for discarding materials that "had been long in the Service and had made the rounds of all the stations" were uniform across the various lighthouse districts.<sup>31</sup>

By the time the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for operating light stations and light vessels in 1939, the heyday of lighthouse library collections had long since passed. As the Lighthouse Bureau's records make plain, stations once considered isolated were no longer cut off from the world. Decreased costs of magazines and improved mail services brought current reading matter to light station employees and their families, who no longer had to rely on quarterly inspections to bring a change in reading matter.

Archival materials do not indicate when library collections were discontinued, but they appear not to have lasted beyond the 1930s. Yet for nearly sixty-five years, trunks of library materials brought entertainment and education to the people of the lighthouse service, and the stations on the coast of North Carolina benefited from that service. Both in terms of numbers of stations served and in terms of continuing interest expressed by lighthouse inspectors, the Fifth District as a whole and North Carolina in particular were among the more "literate" of the lighthouse districts. The story of the lighthouse service's library collections is an almost forgotten footnote in North Carolina's coastal history.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Francis Ross Holland, *America's Lighthouses: Their Illustrated History since 1716* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1972), 50.

<sup>2</sup>HBB's memo to H. Rice, April 21, 1920. All primary sources cited are from the Records of the United States Coast Guard (Record Group 26), National

Archives, Records of the Bureau of Lighthouses and Its Predecessors, 1789-1939, File 1509.

<sup>3</sup>"Preliminary Report of Committee" to Commissioner of Lighthouses, January 20, 1912.

<sup>4</sup>George R. Putnam's Bureau Circular No. 61, November 14, 1911.

<sup>5</sup>Putnam's letter to George F. Bowerman, June 26, 1913.

<sup>6</sup>Bowerman's letter to Putnam, October 22, 1913.

<sup>7</sup>Purchase request, August 19, 1916.

<sup>8</sup>Putnam's letter to Carl H. Milam, June 18, 1919.

<sup>9</sup>Draft of suggested letter to district superintendents, March 10, 1920.

<sup>10</sup>Forrest B. Spaulding's letter to Putnam, March 13, 1920.

<sup>11</sup>Putnam's Circular Letter No. 152, April 12, 1920.

<sup>12</sup>Report, "Service to Lighthouses," October 15, 1920.

<sup>13</sup>W. P. Harman's memo, April 21, 1916.

<sup>14</sup>Mortimer Kaphan's letter to Putnam, May 28, 1928.

<sup>15</sup>Kaphan's letter to Putnam, April 29, 1929

<sup>16</sup>J. T. Yates's memo to Putnam, June 21, 1929, and Yates's memo to the American Dickens League, February 15, 1930.

<sup>17</sup>W. Taylor Joyce's letter to Putnam, February 3, 1932.

<sup>18</sup>Harman's letter to Joyce, February 6, 1932.

<sup>19</sup>George William Carter's letter to Dept. of Commerce, January 24, 1923.

<sup>20</sup>L. M. Hopkins's memo to Commissioner of Lighthouses, October 10, 1929.

<sup>21</sup>T. S. Johnson's memo to Commissioner of Lighthouses, September 30, 1937, and H. L. Beck's memo to Commissioner of Lighthouses, September 28, 1937.

<sup>22</sup>H. D. King's memo to Superintendents of Lighthouses, June 29, 1936.

<sup>23</sup>C. J. Ludwig's letter to Putnam, June 11, 1931.

<sup>24</sup>JZB's letter to Miss M. E. Reynolds, August 25, 1920.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Henderson's letter to Putnam, April 19, 1921, and Putnam's letter to Henderson, April 23, 1921.

<sup>26</sup>H. D. King's memo to Dept. of Commerce, August 12, 1925.

<sup>27</sup>Louise Griffith's letter to Harman, October 4, 1934.

<sup>28</sup>Addendum to R. C. Smith's review of *Lightship*, October 11, 1934.

<sup>29</sup>George J. Foran's letter to Lighthouse Inspector, June 30, 1920.

<sup>30</sup>HRW's letter to Foran, July 28, 1920.

<sup>31</sup>G. Eaton's memo to Commissioner of Lighthouses, July 24, 1920.