

OAK ISLAND COAST GUARD STATION
Highway 160
Oak Island
Brunswick County
North Carolina

HABS No. NC-401

HABS
NC-401

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Southeast Region
Department of the Interior
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OAK ISLAND COAST GUARD STATION

HABS No. NC-401

Location: Oak Island Coast Guard complex, Highway 160,
Oak Island, Brunswick County, North Carolina.

USGS Southport Quadrangle (7.5').

Present Owner: United States Coast Guard

Present Occupant: United States Coast Guard

Present Use: Coast Guard Station (offices and residence)

Significance: The station has been deemed eligible for the NRHP by the State of North Carolina as a representative of the 1930s eclectic "Federal Reserve" style. The station is typical of Federally constructed buildings of the era and region; similar examples are found at the nearby Fort Caswell complex. The building is striking for its stark, "box house" form and general lack of architectural adornment. The porch columns and center gables suggest a slight Colonial Revival influence, although the center gables may also mimic the earlier form of Life-Saving Stations in the region. Its continued use as a Coast Guard Station has preserved this example while others have been abandoned and destroyed.

The complex was established by the United States Life Saving Service in 1889 as a 12-man life boat station. The Oak Island Station was needed to augment the existing Cape Fear Station. The main task of the station was to monitor the Ocean and Cape Fear River, and to provide emergency services, rescue, and succor as necessary. The earlier Station building became officially a Coast Guard Station in 1915. In 1932, the original station was replaced with the current Oak Island Station. The Coast Guard has continued to monitor sea and river traffic, and to assist in times of need. As the site enters its 100th year of use as a Life-Saving/Coast Guard Station, the Station building stands as a marker of a regionally important service.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Antebellum Use of Oak Island

The history of Oak Island is dominated by the Fort Caswell Military Reservation, of which the Oak Island Station tract was once part. Prior to the government procurement of Oak Island in 1825, the island was held predominately by single landowners. Herring and Williams (1983:121-122) report the following antebellum owners of Oak Island:

Maurice Moore	1727 to ???
General James Moore (son)	??? to 1780
Parker Quince,	1780 to 1796
Richard Quince, Jr.	1796 to 1816
Benjamin Smith (350 acres)	1796 to 1816
Hanson Kelly	1816 to 1820
P.R. Dickenson	1820 to 1825

In 1827, work began on Fort Caswell, the centerpiece of the 2,750 acre complex. The fort was a large brick and earth structure which was responsible for guarding the southern (or old) mouth of the Cape Fear River. There were no known structures or earthworks within the present Coast Guard Station tract prior to the Civil War. However, two range lights were established in the 1840s. One light was stationary about 300 m east of the present station; its brick foundation is still present in the marsh. The second light "was a portable unit mounted on skids that could be moved as the channel changed (Herring and Williams 1983:5)."

Civil War Occupation

Oak Island was intensively occupied during the Civil War. The Oak Island Coast Guard Station occupies a portion of the former Confederate earthwork known as Fort Campbell. As the following summary (based on Fonvielle 1987) indicates, Fort Campbell was an integral feature of the defenses of the Cape Fear River.

The port of Wilmington, North Carolina, was a key supply base for the Confederate Army. Very early in the war, the Confederates secured the mouth of the river by constructing a series of earthworks along Oak Island, Smith Island, and Federal Point. The goal of the fortification project was to protect both the new and old inlets of the Cape Fear, to prevent naval advances on Wilmington, and to encourage and to support blockade runners. Fort Fisher guarded the New Inlet, while Fort Holmes

and Fort Caswell protected the southern inlet. Fort Campbell (also known as Battery Campbell) was an auxiliary fortification for Fort Caswell.

Fort Campbell is described by Fonvielle (1987:27) as a "well-built sixteen gun, two-mortar battery." The Union Army produced a plan of Fort Campbell upon its capture in 1865. The plan depicts a battery with a heavily gunned sea face and western land face. The center of the battery contained a large mound with the bomb proof; in addition, five barracks are present northeast of the bomb-proof mound. A comparison of the Union map with a scaled redrawing of the modern soil survey clearly indicates that the present station building probably occupies the former location of the bomb-proof. Herring and Williams wrote (1983:32):

To the author's knowledge no remains of Fort Campbell or Battery Shaw have been located. However, it is speculated that the remains of Fort Campbell may lie beneath the present day Coast Guard Station.

According to Manarin (1966), the following Confederate units occupied Fort Campbell:

Company K, 36th NC Troops: Spring 1862 through Winter 1864;
10th Battalion, NC Heavy Artillery: January 1864 through March 1864;
Company B, 1st Battalion, NC Heavy Artillery: January 1864 through January 1865 (evacuation);
Company F, 40th NC Troops: March 1864 through January 1865 (evacuation and destruction).

On 15 January 1865, the Union forces captured Fort Fisher the keystone of the Cape Fear defenses. The associated Confederate forts and batteries were abandoned immediately following the fall of Fort Fisher. On 16 January 1865, Fort Caswell and Fort Campbell were destroyed by Confederate explosives as the final step of their abandonment.

The 20 January 1865 report from Rear Admiral Porter, US Navy, indicated that Fort Campbell had been verified as abandoned (Long 1900: OR I-11:618-621). He further reports that the following armaments were captured at Fort Campbell and Battery Shaw: six 10-inch cannons; six smoothbore 32-pounders; one rifled 32-pounder; one 8-inch cannon; six fieldpieces; and two mortars. It is probable that only one of the 10-inch cannons was recovered from Battery Shaw (a single gun battery); all the remaining guns were probably captured at Fort Campbell.

Life-Saving Service (1892-1915)

The original life-saving station at Oak Island was constructed in 1889. The land for the station was contained in two small tracts divided out of the Fort Caswell Military Reservation on 23 June 1888. The Annual Report of the Life-Saving Service (ARLS) for 1889 reported that the construction was complete, but that the station had not yet been activated. The 1890 annual report commented:

The station at Oak Island, (near Fort Caswell, at the mouth of Cape Fear River,) North Carolina, mentioned in the last report as completed and ready for occupancy, has since been equipped and placed in commission (ARLS 1890:63).

The station was needed at Oak Island to complement the already existing Cape Fear Life-Saving Station. Specifically, the Oak Island Station was to focus on the territory from the mouth of the Cape Fear south along the coast, including Lockwoods Folly, Shallotte Inlet, and Tubbs Inlet (Stick 1952). Typical of other stations at that time, Oak Island was manned by the Keeper and six surfmen from September through the end of April; the Keeper patrolled alone during the summer months. Sea watch was the major task of the station in terms of time; sea watch consisted of regular patrols of the beaches and monitoring of the surrounding waters from the observation tower.

The original station at Oak Island was similar in construction to other stations of the region, including the Cape Fear Station (see Stick 1985:63). The structure was a two story building with a tower extending upward from the roofline. The original station was apparently located northwest of the current station, with the lighthouse ridge providing partial protection from the sea winds.

In 1890, Oak Island was witness to "one of the few instances on record of the keeper of a lifesaving station being discharged for negligence" (Stick 1952:124). In attending to the wreck of the schooner Joseph H. Neff, Keeper Savage of the Oak Island Station caused delays in both the initial investigations and the fetching of the surf boat. In the end, the duty of the rescue fell upon a single surfman who dragged the two-man crew of the Joseph H. Neff from the surf. The life of one man and the vessel were lost; Keeper Savage was relieved of his duties (Stick 1952).

Dunbar Davis was transferred to the Oak Island Station as Keeper in 1892. He brought with him 10 years of experience as the keeper of the Cape Fear Life-saving Station. Stick (1985:60-61) credits Davis with much success:

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Such rescues and rescue attempts were more the norm than the exception, and the fact that they were accomplished year after year for the next quarter of a century without the death of a single crewman is a tribute to two indomitable men, Dunbar Davis and John L. Watts.

In his book, Graveyard of the Atlantic, Stick (1952:133-143) dedicates an entire chapter to addressing the actions of Dunbar Davis and the Oak Island Station during the hurricane of 1893. Davis and his volunteer crews (it was not the life-saving season) assisted in the rescue of crews from five vessels in a 48 hour period. A surfboat was utilized to pluck the six man crew from the schooner Three Sisters. The Lyle gun and breeches bouy were used in saving the seven crew men from the Kate E. Gifford, another schooner. In addition, transportation, food, clothing, and shelter were provided to the crews of the brig Wustrow, the schooner Jennie E. Thomas and the schooner Enchantress. At the end of his adventure, Davis reported:

By this time I was getting pretty fagged. I had gone without food for two days and without water for 12 hours, and had been wet all the time (as quoted in Stick 1952:142).

The annual reports of the Life-Saving Service provide limited additional information on the station from 1892 through 1915. The reports of 1895, 1897, and 1898 all indicate that seven surfmen was the common crew size at Oak Island; after 1909, an eighth surfman was added. The 1890 and 1910 reports probably reflects the typical level of rescue operations at the turn of the century. The following operations involved the Oak Island Station during Fiscal Years 1890 and 1910:

21 January 1890	Bark <u>San Antonio</u> distressed. Ship and crew of 12 saved (with Cape Fear Station).
21 January 1890	Unidentified boat distressed. Saved boat and crew of six.
21 February 1890	Sailboat distressed. Boat saved. Crew of 2 saved and succored.
28 March 1890	Schooner <u>Addie</u> dsitressed. Ship and crew of 12 rescued.

2 December 1909	Schooner <u>Mary A. Hall</u> distressed. Crew of 2 and ship rescued.

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5 April 1910 Steamer Stowford in trouble. Crew of 26
and ship rescued.

24 April 1910 Sailboat lost. Both passengers rescued.

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD (1915-1989)

In 1915, the Life-Saving Service was combined with the Revenue Cutter Service to form the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard use of Oak Island included the removal of the original station building, the construction of three new structures in the complex, and the building and operation of the Oak Island Lighthouse.

The 1915 Annual Report of the Coast Guard reported the craft present at Oak Island. In addition to the usual beach gear, the station had one 36 foot powered lifeboat and one Beebe-McClellan surfboat (without an engine).

The 1920 Annual Report provides details on "assistance rendered involving saving of life and property." Oak Island was involved in eight operations in Fiscal Year 1920. Most commonly, stranded or disabled motor boats were towed free, but the station also assisted the steamer Navajo, the steamer Samuel Faunce (in conjunction with Cape Fear Station), and the British schooner Emma Belliveau (in conjunction with USCG Cutter Seminole). The nature of these rescues is minimalized in the Annual Report. The assistance to the Navajo was thus reported: "Fouled anchor; drifting toward rocks; raised anchor and towed boat to Southport."

The present station was constructed in 1932 as a twelve man life-saving station. Herring and Williams (1983:57) report that the original station was sold at public auction in 1932, and was moved across the street by the purchaser for use as a residence. In its Annual Reports of 1927 through 1935, the United States Coast Guard had been lobbying heavily for funds to construct new stations or renovate existing ones. For example, the 1929 report states:

Very unfavorable physical conditions obtain at a number of Coast Guard (life-saving) stations due to very old age, usage, inadequacy, and the absence of modern facilities and conveniences. The situation should be remedied, and it is hoped that means will be provided to restore such stations needing it to livable condition (ARUSCG 1929:54).

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The plans for the garage building were finalized in June 1938, and the structure was built shortly thereafter. The garage design was common at Coast Guard stations of that period, and examples remain at Atlantic Beach and Swannsboro stations.

A set of 1953 photographs of the complex show the station, observation tower, garage, and several small storage buildings which no longer exist. In addition, a second hurricane bunker is present on the west side of the station rise (photos on file, USCG Shore Maintenance Detachment, Cleveland).

The present lighthouse at Oak Island was constructed in 1957, and placed in operation on 15 May 1958. The lighthouse measures 155 ft from the ground surface. It was the second most powerful light in the world when completed; standard power was 1,400,000 candle power, and peak light was 14,000,000 candle power (Herring 1967).

An early 1960s photograph of the ATON building construction shows the complex with station, garage, light house, observation tower; the area upon which the ATON structure is being constructed is clearly recent fill (USCG SMD, Cleveland). The heliport was completed in 1964, at which time the observation tower was removed. The ATON Building was completed on 9 March 1966 (OICGS files).

DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Physical Setting

The Coast Guard Station is located approximately 2.0 km west of the eastern tip of Oak Island, North Carolina. The island is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on the south, the Elizabeth River and its marshes on the north and west, and by the Cape Fear River of the east. The complex is located just north of the dune line, and commands a location well suited to monitoring both riverine and maritime traffic.

Date of Construction

The Multi-purpose building was constructed in 1932 to provide more room for operations and residents than available in the earlier station. It was designed as a 12-man lifeboat station house. It is likely that the structure was designed in-house by the Coast Guard; no architect or design firm is identified on the original blueprints.

Physical Description: Description As Built

The original plans did not vary significantly from the present structure in terms of exterior features, but the internal use of space was different than present. The original structure consisted of a basement and two floors with the following features:

Basement. The basement was entered either through a front door accessed from side stairs beneath the front porch, or by an internal stair case from the first floor. The basement contained a storm clothes room, a generator room, a coal bin, and much unspecified open space. The floor of the full basement was approximately 2 feet below the ground surface.

First Floor. The first floor included: the bed room, toilet, and office for the Officer in Charge; an additional bed room; the pantry; the kitchen; and the mess room. A laundry room was present in the small wing in the right rear of the first floor; this room also provided access from the rear of the structure. Entrance from the front was via one of two doors opening from an open porch.

Second Floor. The second floor contained four bedrooms, the crew's toilet, and the crew's sleeping quarters. All of the rooms opened onto a common hall which was accessed from the first floor via a straight staircase. Access to the unimproved attic

was possible through a disappearing stairway in the roof of the hall.

The structure was constructed on a poured, reinforced concrete foundation which extended to the base of the first floor. The first floor was supported by five inch, cement filled pipe columns. Balloon frame construction was utilized. The exterior of the structure was covered with wooden siding, and wooden shingles with 7/8 inch tongue and groove sheathing covered all of the roof. It was reported that during the 1950s, painting was necessary on a regular basis to protect the wooden siding. The chimney was constructed of red brick, with a cement cap and metal top guard.

Physical Description: Alterations

Alterations to the structure included: changing the front porch from enclosed to open; the revision of the basement and first floor plans; the movement of fire safety escape ladders to the south and east walls; the installation of metal protective siding; and removal of the associated observation tower in the front yard.

In 1960, the floor plan of the station was revised. The galley and mess room were moved from the first floor to the basement, an additional recreation room was established in the basement, and the former galley became an office and bath.

In 1953 (and possibly on the station when originally built), fire escape was possible through a Z-shaped metal stairway on the rear (north) side of the station. The steps were replaced at some point by metal ladders on the east (second floor to ground) and south (attic to porch roof to ground) sides of the station. It is possible that the new ladders were installed with the aluminum siding in 1974.

When originally constructed, the station was augmented by a large steel observation tower located immediately southeast of the Multi-Purpose Building. The tower appears in 1958, 1961, and 1963 photographs of the complex; it is not present in a 1971 photograph. Oral history holds that the tower was removed upon completion of the ATON building in 1966. It is likely that the second (western) hurricane bunker was also removed in the late 1960s.

The interior of the station was rehabilitated in 1972. This reworking included new paneling and the rearrangement of the galley. Asphalt shingles were also applied in 1972. The aluminum siding which is present today was installed in 1974; the garage building also received siding at that time. It is likely

that the screening was removed from the front porch in the early 1970s.

The former disappearing stairs to the attic were replaced in the spring of 1988. A wooden staircase was installed from the dormitory/berthing room on the second floor to the attic.

Physical Description: Current Features

Oak Island Station is a two-story "box house" with a steep pitched, side gabled roof. The structure has a full basement, and a finished attic. There is a red brick, interior chimney which exits on the rear slope of the roof. Two center (cross) gables are present, increasing floor space and light in the attic; the center gables peak below the main roof crest. Sketches of the current floor plans are attached.

The only variances from the basic rectangular form are a centered front porch and a small wing on the right rear of the house. Both have secondary, dropped roofs. The raised front porch (on the first floor level; 5.5 feet above ground surface) also forms a roof for the basement level sub-porch (approximately two feet below ground surface).

There are four possible entrances to the structure. Two doors are found on the front porch; they enter into the first floor. A single door is present on the sub-porch at the front of the basement level. The final door opens from the right rear wing of the house; 5.5 feet tall steps span from the ground surface to the first floor level at the door.

The exterior materials include: reinforced concrete foundation and porch supports; white aluminum siding over the timber balloon frame; and brown asphalt shingles on all roofs. The basement level exterior is painted blue grey, while the trim of the upper floors is white to match the siding.

The structure is well situated in its immediate environment. Its front faces the highway and the ocean. The remains of the mound of the Civil War Fort Campbell provide a commanding, raised setting for the building; in the complex, only the lighthouse sits at a higher elevation. This setting is most appropriate given the mission of the Coast Guard. A front walk and steps denote public accessibility, while the rest of the sidewalk system reflects an organized integration of space within the Coast Guard complex. The location of the Coast Guard complex is ideal, as it provides a view of the Atlantic Ocean on the front side, ready land access from the adjacent highway, and boat access via a canal from the the Elizabeth River.

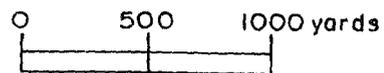
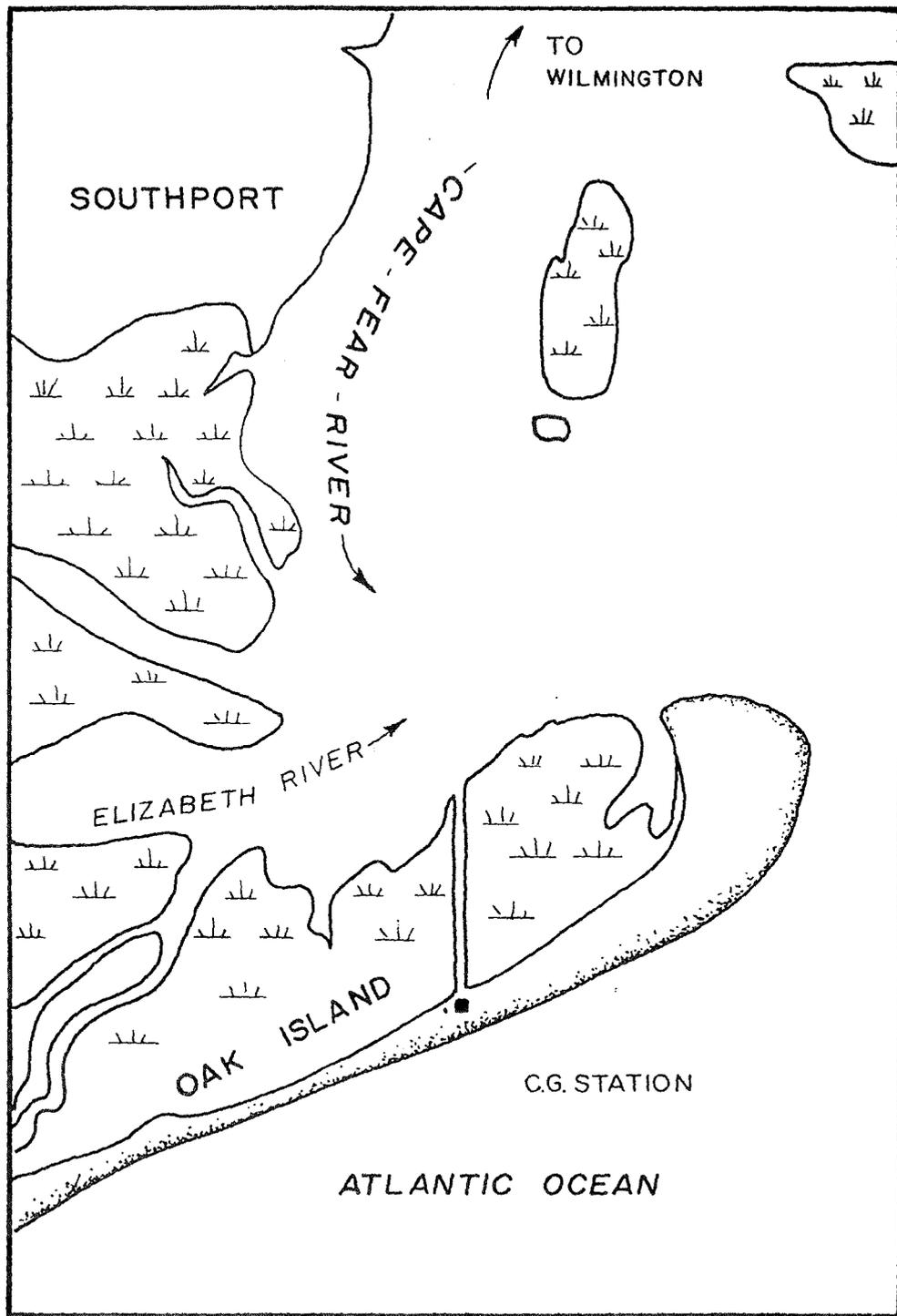
The station structure itself can best be described as utilitarian eclectic (Federal Reservation) style. While certain traits (i.e., the porch columns and center gables) indicate a Colonial Revival influence, it appears that the main concern was practicality of design. It is possible that the center gables represent a design feature retained from the earlier life-saving stations of the region. The stark Oak Island Station is almost identical to the former station at Cape Lookout (personal communication, Chief Nelson 1989) and other stations of the 1930s and early 1940s. The boxy form with limited architectural elaboration is also seen in many of the structures of the nearby Fort Caswell complex (Herring and Williams 1983). It appears that the Oak Island Station was constructed according to standard plans of the Coast Guard, with little or no influence from regional vernacular patterns.

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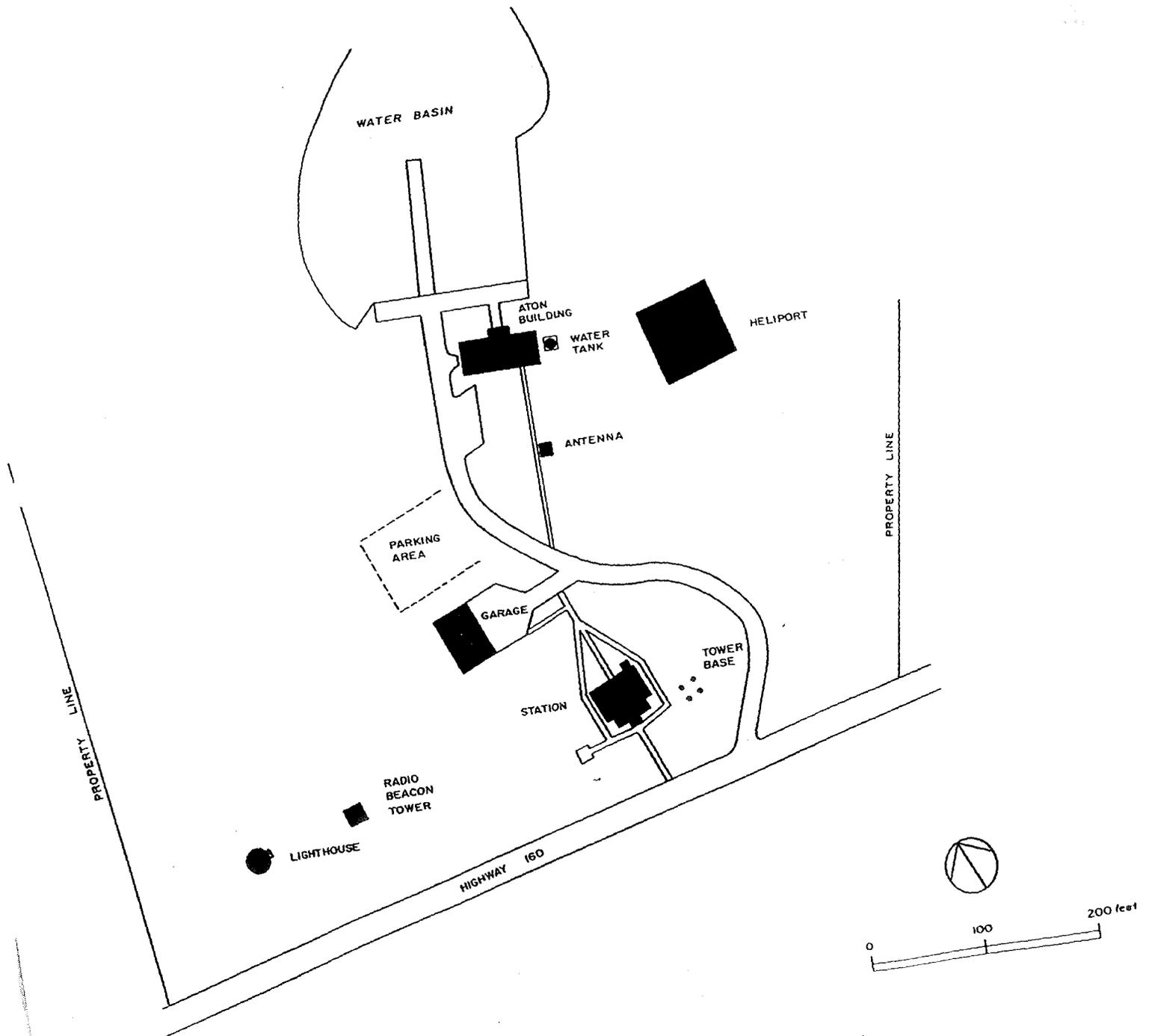
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GRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

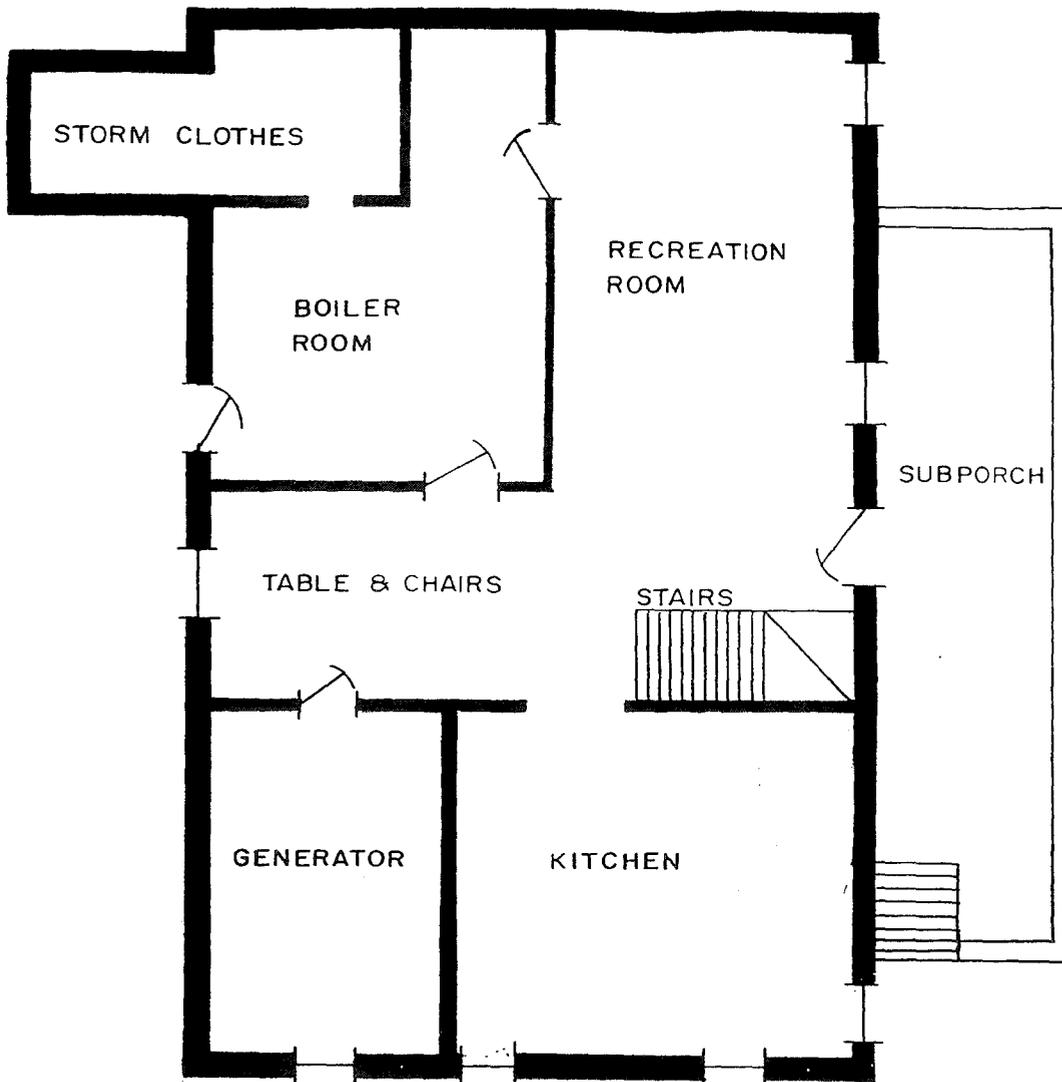
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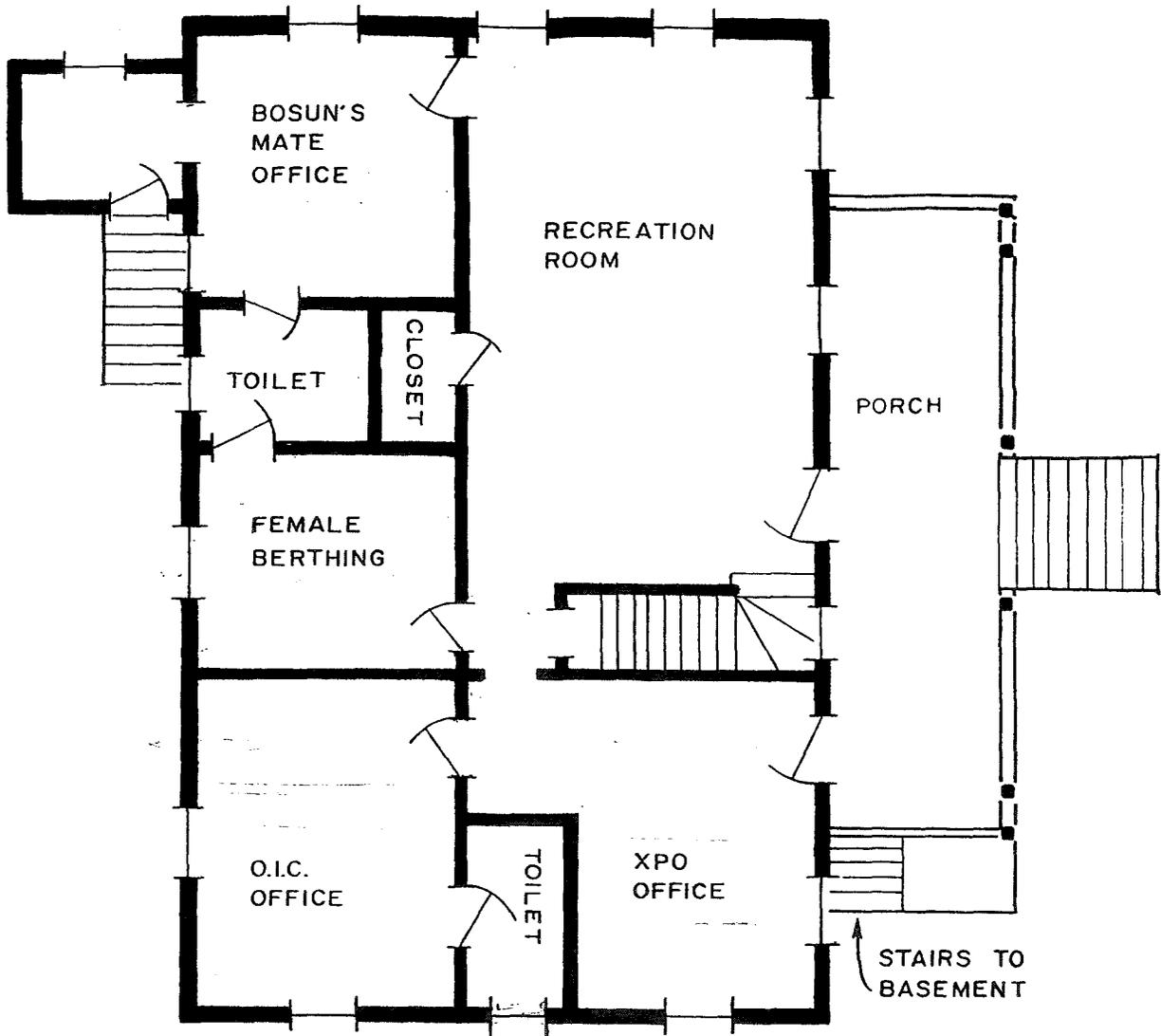
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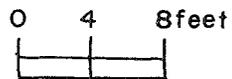
BASEMENT

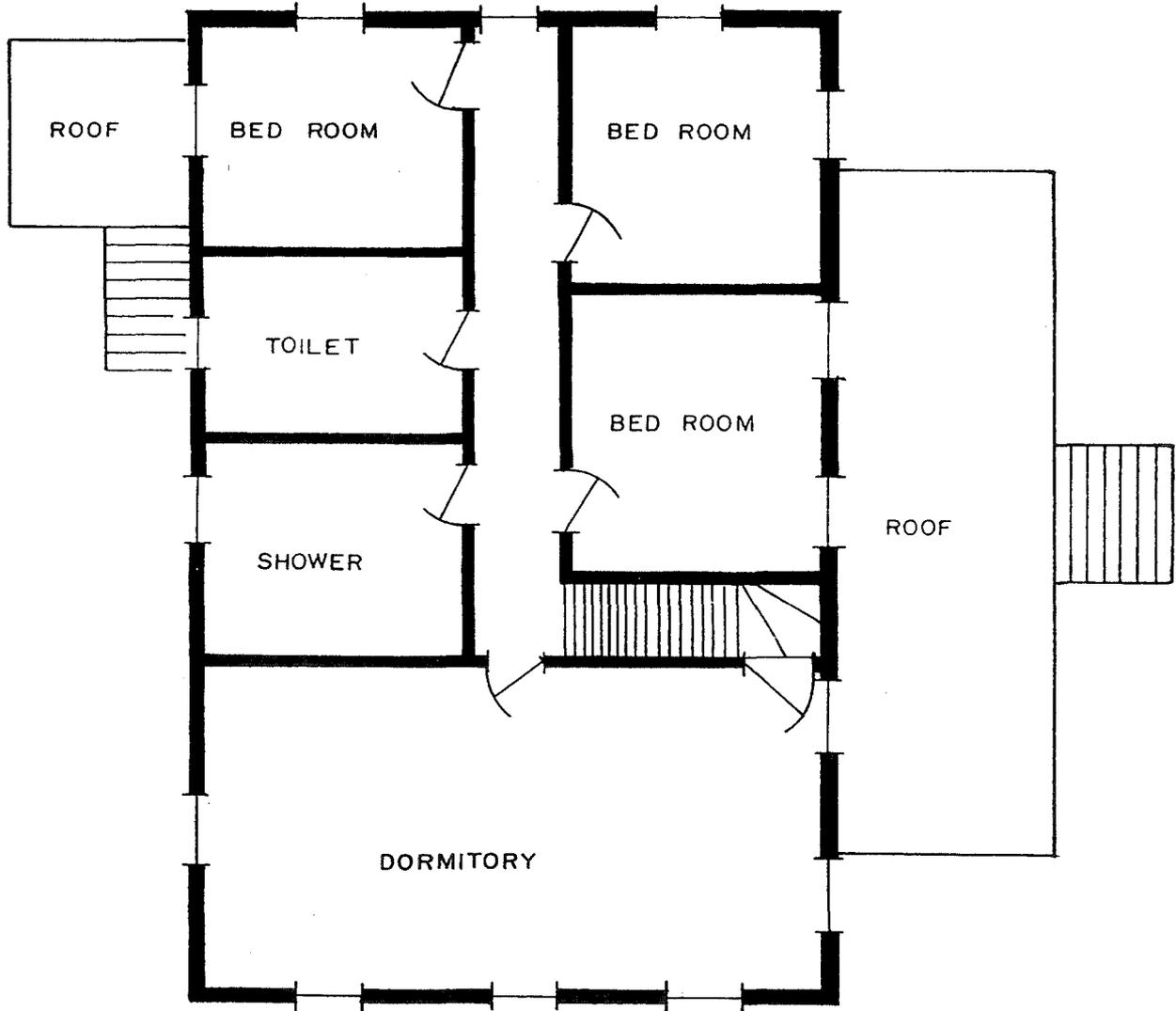
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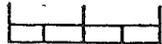
FIRST FLOOR PLAN





SECOND FLOOR PLAN

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