

Nation & World



North Carolina museum must be moved to save it from flooding

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Nellie Myrtle Pridgen collected shells, sea glass and other artifacts from the beach. The old store that houses her trove will be moved to higher ground on U.S. 158 in Nags Head. (Jeff Hampton / The Virginian-Pilot via AP)

By **JEFF HAMPTON** *The Associated Press*

NAGS HEAD, N.C. (AP) — Chaz Winkler walked along the roadside next to a rare undeveloped tract on U.S. 158. He crossed a shallow ditch and ducked under cedar limbs to enter a natural Outer Banks habitat of wax myrtles, prickly pear and yaupon — an oasis among shopping centers and restaurants.

Winkler looked east toward the row of traditional shingle-sided Nags Head cottages along the oceanfront.

“The store is going to come in right here,” he said. “As you can see, we will still be looking over the historic district.”

Winkler and his partner, Dorothy Hope, plan to pick up and truck the 103-year-old two-story building that houses the Outer Banks Beachcomber Museum from N.C. 12 near the oceanfront to U.S. 158, about 450 feet away.

The 30,000-square-foot tract sits 8 feet higher than the current site.

That’s a lot. While the shingled structure hasn’t flooded since the 1962 Ash Wednesday storm, others like Hurricane Matthew in October 2016 have left water swirling around the museum, threatening to inundate support timbers, buckle hardwood floors and leave behind dampness and mildew that could ruin the museum’s valuable contents.

The building is listed with the National Register of Historic Places and houses the collections of Nellie Myrtle Pridgen, who walked the beaches plucking treasures from the sand for 60 years.

Shelves that once held cans of beans and jars of pickles when her parents ran one of the few stores in Nags Head now display bowls of shells, jugs of sea glass, vintage bottles and shipwreck artifacts.

The stockpile has a worldwide reputation chronicled in magazines, books, newspapers and websites. The layout appears much as it did when Nellie died in 1992.

Winkler and Hope are trying to raise \$200,000 through direct donations and Indiegogo, an online crowdfunding site, to move the store and the 84-year-old two-story house behind it, and to install parking, a foundation and septic system.

“It’s a lot more profitable to own a rental than to save Outer Banks history,” he said. “We should be saving history. This is the land of beginnings.”

Members of the Nags Head Beach Cottage Row Historic District bought six of eight lots in the tract at an auction earlier this year, he said. Patrick and Cathy Trask, homeowners within the district, bought two of the parcels for \$220,000 for the museum. They plan to swap properties later.

“Our goal was to prevent another shopping center from going in,” Patrick Trask said. “We just love Nags Head and the historic section.”

This would not be the first time the old store has moved.

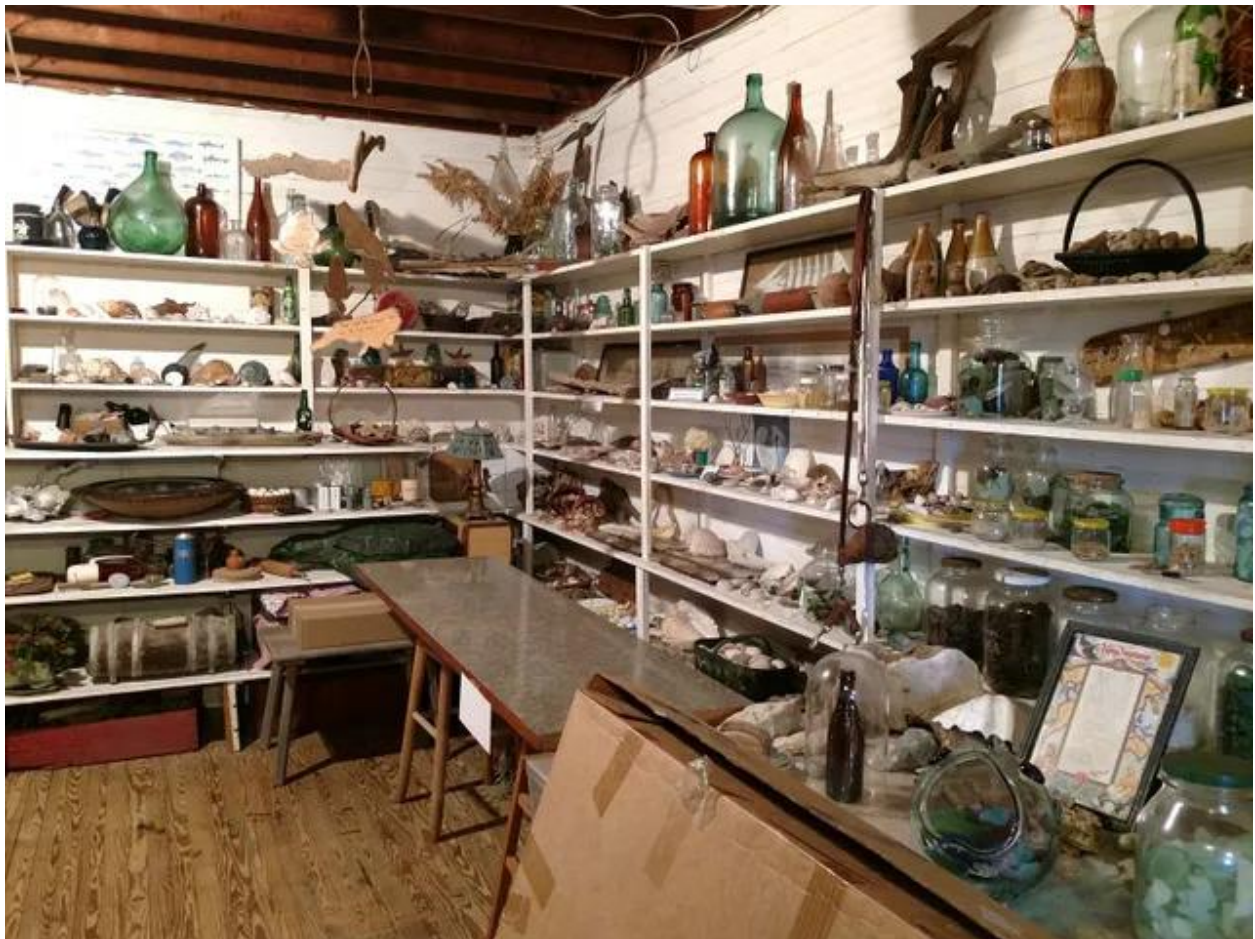
Nellie Myrtle, as she was called, was born in 1918 to Mattie and Jethro Midgett. Her parents built the store on the sound side in 1914. Nellie and her brother helped run the business. In 1932, the Midgetts mounted the building on logs and rolled it over the sand to the oceanside where more tourists were.

Pridgen placed her collection in the store and kept adding to it after her parents died in the 1970s. Her late daughter, Carmen Gray, along with Hope and Winkler opened the store sporadically as a museum in 2003.

Since then, it has become one of the highlight attractions of the Outer Banks, Winkler said.

The site will be called the Carmen Gray Coastal Heritage and Habitat Preserve, Hope said.

“She did this for a reason,” she said. “It needs to be saved.”



The Nellie Myrtle Pridgen Collection in her mother's historic grocery, Mattie Midgette's Store
