

Beacons of the Coast

Over a century ago, mariners travelling along the Atlantic coast encountered dangerous shoals and treacherous storms. Their guides were the beacons of light produced by lighthouses which helped mariners navigate the perilous coastline. For mariners traveling along the North Carolina coast, seven lighthouse beacons were constructed to guide them through an area known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic." Hundreds of shipwrecks occurred due to the dangers of this area.

Today, the ships traveling the coast use modern tools such as radar and sonar. The beacons continue to operate, standing as a reminder of the hardships encountered by our ancestors to help settle the country.

These seven lighthouses found on the North Carolina coast stand as pieces of our past.



CURRITUCK BEACH LIGHTHOUSE

This lighthouse was constructed from 1874 - 1875, and it lit the last dark spot on the Carolina coast between the Cape Fear lighthouse in Virginia and Bodie Island. The red brick lighthouse rises 158 feet above sea level. Unlike many other lighthouses that received distinctive day marks, Currituck was not painted. But its red brick is unique on the Carolina coast. It has a short light signal: 5 seconds on, 15 seconds off. There is a Fresnel lens still working in the lighthouse and it is activated from dusk to dawn.

Currituck Lighthouse is open 10-6 daily from Easter to Thanksgiving weekend. You can walk to the top of the lighthouse.

BODIE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

This was the third lighthouse to be built on Bodie Island (pronounced "body") and was constructed in the early 1870's. The tower is 150 feet high. This structure has a day marking of broad alternating black and white circular bands. The Bodie Island light signal is 5 seconds on, 5 seconds off, and 5 seconds on, 22.5 seconds off. The light is on from dusk to dawn.

Bodie Island Lighthouse is within Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The base of the tower is open intermittently. The Keeper's Quarters is open seasonally.



CAPE HATTERAS LIGHTHOUSE

Towering 196 feet above the sand, Cape Hatteras Lighthouse is the tallest in the United States. It was completed in 1870. Its distinctive daymark of four spirals (two black and two white that extend around the tower 1 and 1/2 times) was applied in 1873. The Cape Hatteras light signal is provided by a duplex airport beacon and it rotates every 13 seconds. The light operates from dusk to dawn.

Cape Hatteras Lighthouse is being relocated during the summer of 1999. It will be moved 2,900 feet inland due to shoreline erosion and will be closed to the public until the summer of 2000.



OCRACOKE LIGHTHOUSE

Constructed in 1823, this lighthouse is the second oldest still operating on the North Carolina coast. The 76-foot high tower is located in the community of Ocracoke. Since the tower was lighted, it has been painted white. Unlike the other lighthouses that are much larger, this lighthouse was built for navigators to locate Ocracoke Inlet. It displays a “constant light” which means there is no rotation or “blinking.” The small Fresnel lens operates from sunset to dawn.

Ocracoke Lighthouse is part of Cape Hatteras National Seashore. It is closed to the public.



CAPE LOOKOUT LIGHTHOUSE

This is the second lighthouse built at Cape Lookout. It towers 163 feet above sea-level. Constructed between 1857-1859, it received its distinctive daymark of what is called “diagonal checkerboard” design in 1873. The 15-second rotation light signal is provided by a duplex airport beacon. Cape Lookout’s first-order Fresnel was removed in the 1970’s and today is in service at the Southeast Lighthouse in Block Island, Rhode Island. The lighthouse is located within Cape Lookout National Seashore, but it is owned and operated by the U.S. Coast Guard. Cape Lookout light operates 24 hours a day and is still considered an active working lighthouse and is closed to the public.

A keeper’s quarters is near the base of the lighthouse and is open seasonally.

BALD HEAD LIGHTHOUSE

The oldest lighthouse in North Carolina, Bald Head Lighthouse was constructed in 1817. It is 90 feet high and is one of three towers built on Bald Head Island. Its beacon guided ships into the mouth of the Lower Cape Fear River until it was replaced by Oak Island Lighthouse. Unlike the other lighthouses Old Baldy is octagonal in shape. It was built of brick and the exterior was plastered to provide the tower with an off-white daymark. The lighthouse underwent exterior and interior rehabilitation in the early 1990’s.

Bald Head Lighthouse is privately owned. Visitors cannot walk to the top of this lighthouse.



OAK ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

This lighthouse went into service on May 15, 1958. The beacon in the tower is the second strongest light in the world. Four flashes occur at 1-second intervals followed by 6 seconds of darkness. The light produces such a powerful heat that repairmen wear protective clothing when working in the beacon room. The tower rises 169 feet above the water. The tower’s daymark is black on top, white in the middle and gray at the bottom. Unlike many lighthouses which have painted daymarks, the Oak Island Lighthouse daymarks were mixed in the cement finish.

Oak Island Lighthouse is owned and operated by the U.S. Coast Guard. Visitors are not allowed to walk to the top of the tower.

For more information: Cape Lookout National Seashore
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