

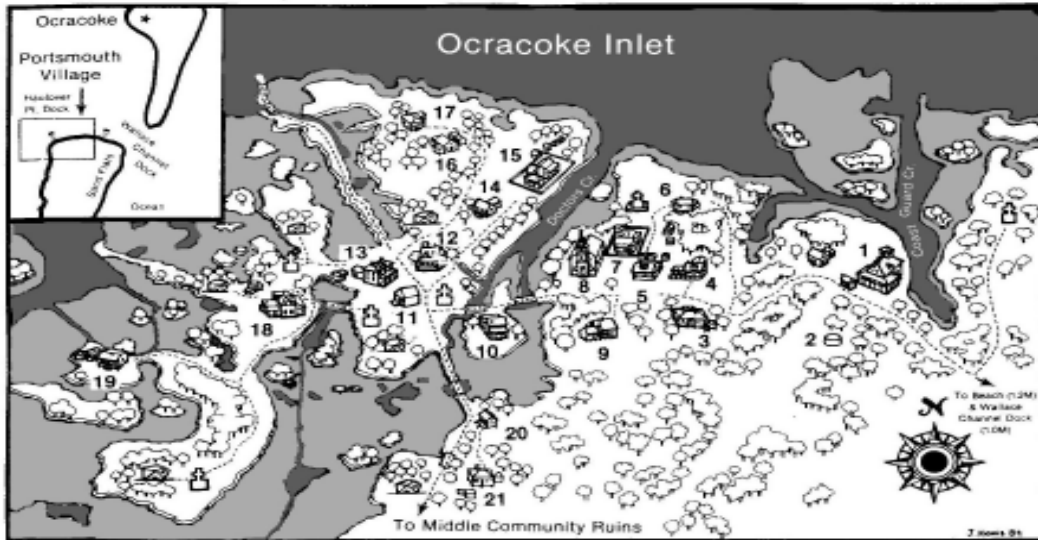
# Cape Lookout

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cape Lookout National Seashore  
North Carolina



## Historic Portsmouth Village

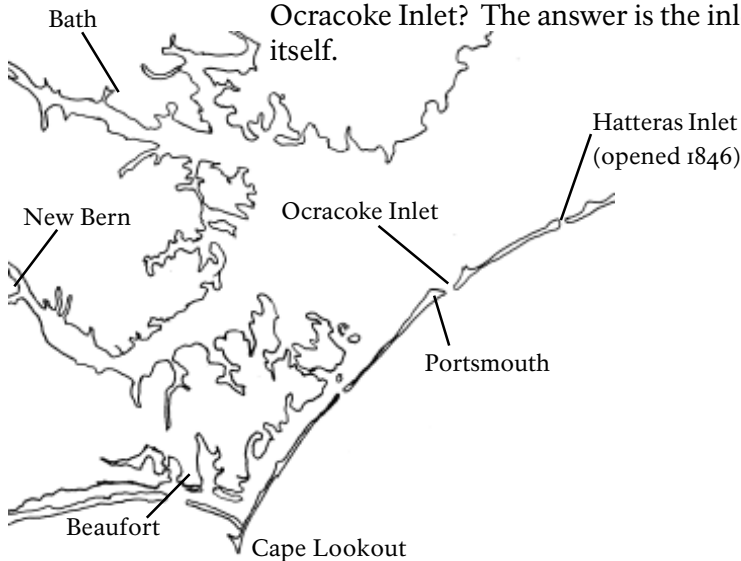


1. U.S. Life-Saving Service Complex
  2. Cistern - U.S. Marine Hospital site
  3. Lionel & Emma Gilgo House
  4. Harry & Lida Dixon House
  5. Jesse & Lillian Babb House
  6. Ed & Kate Styron House
  7. Ed, Nora & Elma Dixon House
  8. Methodist Church
  9. Washington Roberts House
  10. George & Patsy Dixon House
  11. Post Office/General Store
  12. Walker & Sarah Styron House
  13. Theodore & Annie Salter House (Visitor Center)
  14. Tom & Lucy Gilgo House
  15. Henry Pigott House
  16. Carl Dixon House
  17. Frank Gaskill House
  18. Jody Styron and Tom Bragg House
  19. T. T. Potter House
  20. Cecil & Leona Gilgo House
  21. Portsmouth School
- Water   
  Marsh   
 Cemetery  
 Shrub Thicket/Grassland   
 Ruin

Over a century ago, Portsmouth was a bustling sea village. Today, the village stands in stark contrast to its days filled with sounds of fishermen, children playing, lifesavers practicing their rescue drill, the tinkle of livestock bells and the call of “Mailboat!” Yet all has not been lost. The echoes of the past seem to surround you here, inviting you to explore and to imagine daily life in this harsh environment.

### ...a thriving port town

In 1753, the North Carolina Assembly approved an act that created Portsmouth Village. By 1770, the village had grown to be one of the largest settlements on the Outer Banks. For nearly a century, the town was a major port on the Carolina coast. What attracted such activity to a remote tip of land forming one end of Ocracoke Inlet? The answer is the inlet itself.



Ocracoke Inlet provided access through the Outer Banks to important inland towns. However, the sound waters were too shallow for large, heavily weighted ships to navigate. Such ships were forced to transfer their cargo to lighter, shallow draft boats. This practice is known as “lightering.” At Portsmouth were built the warehouses and docks needed for the lightering business. As the industry grew, so did Portsmouth. In 1842, over 1,400 vessels and two-thirds of the exports of the state passed through Ocracoke Inlet.

During the 1840’s changes were on the horizon for Portsmouth. The shoals (shallow areas) in Ocracoke Inlet were growing. A new and deeper inlet at Hatteras was opened by a hurricane in 1846. Shipping routes shifted north to the new inlet. In addition, more and more goods were being carried by the railroad. Portsmouth’s days as a commercial center were drawing to a close.

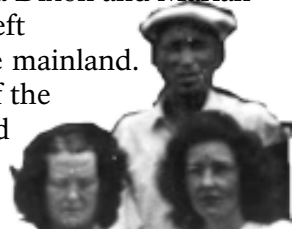
### ...a fishing hamlet



The 1860 census for Portsmouth listed 685 residents. The coming of the Civil War brought changes. As the Union Army advanced down the Outer Banks, residents fled for the mainland. After the war, many residents chose not to return.

For the islanders that remained, fishing replaced shipping as the primary occupation. Isolation, a depressed economy, and the destruction caused by

hurricanes continued the decline in population. In 1956, the population numbered just 17 residents. With the death of Henry Pigott in early 1971, the last two residents, Elma Dixon and Marian Babb, reluctantly left Portsmouth for the mainland. Another chapter of the village’s history had come to an end.



**...glimpses of village life**



**The United States Life-Saving Station:**

The station was a leading influence in the community from the late 1890's until its closure in 1937. The crews were often made up from local citizens. Life was disciplined, drills harsh, and respect in the community was widespread. From the watchtower, a nightly guard scanned the waters for vessels in trouble. Foot patrols walked the dark, stormy ocean beaches. Behind the large doors of the boathouse, oar powered surfboats waited, ready to be sent down the ramp and out to sea at a moment's notice.



**Religious Life:**

While the Life-Saving Service played an important role in the village, the church was equally vital to community life. At one time, the island had two churches, a Methodist and a Primitive Baptist. Disaster befell both church buildings in 1913. Only the Methodist Church was rebuilt and still stands today.

**The Post Office:**

A Post Office was first established in Portsmouth in 1840. Like everything else that reached Portsmouth, the mail arrived by boat. When the mailboat was due, everyone came to the Post Office to check the incoming mail. A trip to the Post Office might last for a while as neighbors met and talked. As Portsmouth declined, the Post Office remained one of the village's few links with the outside world. In 1956, a postage stamp was the town's only purchasable item.



The Post Office closed in 1959 following the retirement of the Postmistress, Miss Annie Salter.



**... the people**



Portsmouth's history is not so much of ships, buildings and storms, but of the people who once lived here.

Portsmouth was home to Miss Mary Dixon, teacher at the island's one room schoolhouse. For 37 years, Miss Mary taught readin', 'riting, and 'rithmetic to all the island's youth.



Portsmouth was also home to children like Dorothy Styron. In 1926, her parents ordered a toy airplane from a catalog and it was delivered by mailboat to the Village. In a community where extravagant gifts were rare, this was an extra special Christmas gift for a little girl.



**... a quiet historic village**

In 1976, Portsmouth Village became a part of Cape Lookout National Seashore. Three years later, the village was listed as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places. Restoration work began on the buildings and structures within the 250 -acre historic district. Today, the Portsmouth story continues, providing a

glimpse of a typical Outer Banks village of not so long ago. As you walk down the lanes and trails of Portsmouth, imagine yourself in a different time -- a time without electricity or modern conveniences. These historic buildings will tell us much if we care to listen.....

**...your Portsmouth experience**

The Theodore & Annie Salter House (Visitor Center), Church, School, Post Office and the U.S. Life-Saving Station are open to the public. These historic buildings are not wheelchair accessible. Other structures are occupied by National Park Service lease holders and park personnel. Please respect their privacy.

Public facilities are **limited**. Bathrooms (flush toilets) are located in the Visitor Center and composting toilets are located on the beach road past the U.S. Life - Saving Station.

During your visit be prepared for unpredictable weather changes and Portsmouth's notorious mosquitoes. Be sure to bring insect repellent, drinking water, food, sunscreen, adequate clothing, a hat and good walking shoes. The village trails are unpaved and can be flooded at high tide.

Pets are allowed on a six-foot leash. Pets are not allowed in the buildings.

For additional information: on the web [www.nps.gov/caloc](http://www.nps.gov/caloc) or call 252-728-2250.