



Ocracoke Light Station



NPS / KURT MOSES

The Ocracoke Light Station, consisting of the Ocracoke Lighthouse, Double Keepers’ Quarters and five outbuildings, is one of the oldest functioning stations in North America, and pays tribute to the important shipping channels off Ocracoke.

Ocracoke Inlet

Located between today’s Hatteras and Portsmouth Islands, Ocracoke is a sixteen mile-long island ranging from one-half to two miles wide. Like most other islands of the Outer Banks, early Ocracoke was largely inaccessible and conditions were difficult. However, Ocracoke Inlet was of such importance to commerce that in 1715 North Carolina’s Colonial Assembly stationed pilots at Ocracoke to guide ships through the inlet.

By the early 1800s, Ocracoke Inlet gained importance as the only navigable inlet in this section of the Outer Banks, providing access to the ports of New Bern, Edenton, and Elizabeth City. Over 60 percent of North Carolina’s exports would pass through Ocracoke Inlet.

Navigating treacherous inlets like Ocracoke was not easy, and hundreds of shipwrecks would give the Outer Banks the nickname, “The Graveyard of the Atlantic.”

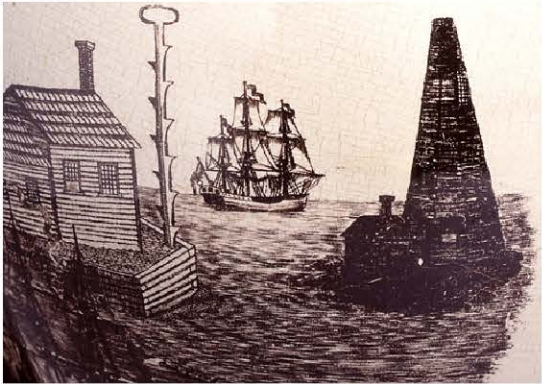
Early Solutions

A lighthouse at Ocracoke Inlet would help improve safety and help protect valuable commerce. North Carolina’s Colonial Assembly first called for a lighthouse on Ocracoke in 1789, with the first lighthouse being constructed on Shell Castle Island in 1797 inside Ocracoke Inlet.

Shell Castle Lighthouse was a fifty-five foot, pyramidal-shaped wood structure, but the lighthouse was short lived. By 1814, storms had caused the channel to shift significantly and shoal up, leaving the lighthouse ineffective. Lightning would destroy the lighthouse in 1818.

Instead of rebuilding, Congress appropriated money to station a lightship, or floating lighthouse in Ocracoke Inlet, but this also proved ineffective.

In 1822, for a charge of \$50, the federal government purchased two acres at the south end of Ocracoke Island as the site for the new lighthouse.



United States Lighthouse Service Water Pitcher (left and close-up right), showing the Shell Island Lighthouse and passing sailing ship.

The Light Station

Constructed by Massachusetts builder Noah Porter and finished in 1823, the tower has stood for two centuries. Total cost, including the one story, one bedroom keeper’s house, was \$11,359- far below the \$20,000 budgeted.

The lighthouse stands 75 feet tall. Its diameter narrows from 25 feet at the base to 12 feet at its peak. The walls are solid brick - 5 feet thick at the bottom tapering to 2 feet at the top. An octagonal lantern crowns the tower and houses the beacon. The exterior’s solid white coloration serves as its identifying mark to mariners by day.

A fourth-order Fresnel lens was installed in

1854, replacing the old reflector system. Its hand-cut prisims and magnifying glass greatly intensified the light. Early in the Civil War, the lens was dismantled by Confederate troops but reinstalled in 1864 by Union troops. A new fourth order lens was installed in 1899. Originally an oil-burning light, the Ocracoke light was electrified and automated in 1946. The present light is equal to 8,000 candle-power and casts a stationary beam that can be seen 14 miles.

The lighthouse served its purpose. It provided mariners with ample warning and a marker by which to safely navigate the ever-changing Ocracoke Inlet.

Life at the Light

As duties at the lighthouse increased, an assistant keeper position was established. To house the second keeper and his family, a separate addition was added to the original quarters, doubling the size of the living area. The double keepers’ quarters still stands on the site today, along with a generator house, oil house carpenter shop, storehouse, and a privy.

Keepers performed a wide range of duties. Maintaining the buildings and grounds, hauling oil, trimming wicks, and polishing the lens were all part of a well-trained lightkeeper’s regulated life.

Ocracoke lighthouse keepers fished, hunted waterfowl, raised livestock, and planted gardens. Due to the proximity of the village,

the keepers and their families enjoyed a social life on Ocracoke and their children were schooled in the village. The US Lighthouse Service provided a traveling library to their isolated employees. Cases of library books were circulated every six months to light stations along the coasts.

During hurricanes, the light station served as a place of refuge for some local residents. Situated on higher ground, the complex often remained above flood waters. Villagers, sometimes arriving by boats which navigated inundated roadways, waited out the storm in the keeper’s home.

After the light was automated in 1946, the need for an onsite keeper wasn’t essential. The final keeper, Clyde Farrow, served until 1954.



MICHIGAN LIGHTHOUSE CONSERVANCY

The United States Lighthouse Service created a network of portable libraries that would travel in between light stations, providing a connection to the outside world in these often isolated locations.



NPS PHOTO

Capt. Joseph Merritt Burrus served as a longtime Lighthouse Keeper at Ocracoke Light Station from 1929-1946. In total 11 principal keepers served at Ocracoke from 1824-1954.

Light Station Today

In 1999, the United States Coast Guard transferred ownership of the Ocracoke Light Station to the National Park Service. Still an active aid-to-navigation, the United States Coast Guard maintains the light, while the facilities are maintained by the National Park Service.

The lighthouse is not open to climbing. Unlike other area lighthouses, it is not easy to access the lantern gallery, and requires crawling through a small door.

While storm impacts are a way of life on Ocracoke, Hurricane Dorian 2019 brought

record soundside storm surge to the island, depositing nearly 2 feet of water and silt inside the keepers quarters.

In 2021, the National Park Service received disaster relief funding from US Congress to mitigate the damages to the light station caused by Hurricane Dorian. The National Park Service is using this opportunity to repair and rehabilitate the keepers’ quarters, and to raise the building five feet above ground-level to increase storm resiliency.