



...a thriving port town

PORTSMOUTH VILLAGE

Welcome to Portsmouth Village. Life here is different nowadays. Over a century ago, it was a bustling sea village. Today, the village stands in stark contrast to its days filled with sounds of fishermen, children playing, lifesavers drilling, the tinkle of livestock bells and the call of “Mailboat!.”

In 1753, the North Carolina Assembly approved an act that created Portsmouth Village. By 1770, the village quickly grew 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 and harsh environment on the tip of land forming one end of Ocracoke Inlet? The answer is the inlet itself.

Ocracoke Inlet was a major trade route through the Outer Banks to important North Carolina ports. The large heavily weighted ships found the sound waters too shallow to navigate and were forced to transfer their cargo to lighter, shallow draft boats. Portsmouth was known as a “lightering” village. Here were the storage and shipping facilities for the lightering business. As the shipping industry grew, so did Portsmouth.

Yet all has not been lost. These structures in the village tell a story of changing times. The echoes of the past seem to surround you here, and give you an invitation to explore....and to imagine the struggle against the harsh environment.

In 1842, over 1,400 vessels and two-thirds of the exports of the state passed through Ocracoke Inlet. The 1860 census reports for Portsmouth Village listed 685 residents.

But after 1860 Portsmouth Village underwent changes. The coming of the Civil War brought a population change. As the Union Army advanced down the Outer Banks, residents fled for the mainland. After the war, many of the residents chose not to return to the village.

The reasons were not just economic or political. Before the war began, Ocracoke Inlet began to shoal (shallow) and a hurricane opened a new deeper inlet at Hatteras in 1846. Shipping routes shifted north. In addition, more and more goods began to travel on the mainland railroads. Portsmouth’s days of commerce were over.

...a fishing hamlet

Fishing replaced shipping as the primary occupation for the islanders that remained. In 1894, a United States Life Saving Station was established in the village and for nearly 50 years, the Service would play a vital role in the community. But steadily the population continued to decline. In 1956, the population numbered 17 residents. The sands of time had begun to run out for Portsmouth.

Isolation, a depressed economy, and the harsh environment hastened the final abandonment of Portsmouth. With the death of Henry Pigott in early 1971, the last two residents, Elma Dixon and Marion Babb, reluctantly left Portsmouth. Another chapter of the village’s history had come to an end.

...a quiet historic village

Today the Portsmouth story continues. In 1976, with the establishment of Cape Lookout National Seashore, a new life came to Portsmouth Village. The 250-acre historic district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places which recognizes outstanding buildings and districts throughout the United States.

As you walk down the lanes and trails of Portsmouth, you will get a glimpse of a typical Outer Banks village. Buildings will tell us much if we care to listen. Modest houses speak of a working class community. But buildings alone do not tell the story....

...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 home to families like Dorothy Styron (pictured at left). In 1926, her parents ordered the toy airplane from a catalog and it was delivered by mail-boat to the Village. In a community where extravagant gifts were rare, this was an extra special Christmas gift for a little girl.

...glimpses of Portsmouth



The United States Life Saving 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.

While the Life Saving Service played an important role in the village, the church filled another niche in their lives. At one time, the island had two churches, a Methodist and a Primitive Baptist. Both churches were destroyed by fires in 1913. The Methodist Church was rebuilt and still stands today.

In the center of the village stands a small building that served as the town’s information and social hub, the United States Post Office. Established in 1840, this building also served as the general store. A typical afternoon at the Post Office might have consisted of political discussions, fish tales and croquet matches. 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. In 1959, the Post Office closed its doors for the last time.

Summer kitchens and dairy houses provide glimpses of an earlier time without generators or electricity. The kerosene stove of the past could leave homes sweltering in the summer. Thus cooking was restricted to separate kitchen buildings. With no refrigerators on the island, residents used a shaded screened dairy house and a cooling sea breeze to keep things cool and fresh.

...your Portsmouth experience



The Visitor Center and the Church are open to the public. The Post Office and Life Saving Station may be open at certain periods of time. Other structures are occupied by National Park Service personnel or holders of NPS leases. Please respect their privacy.

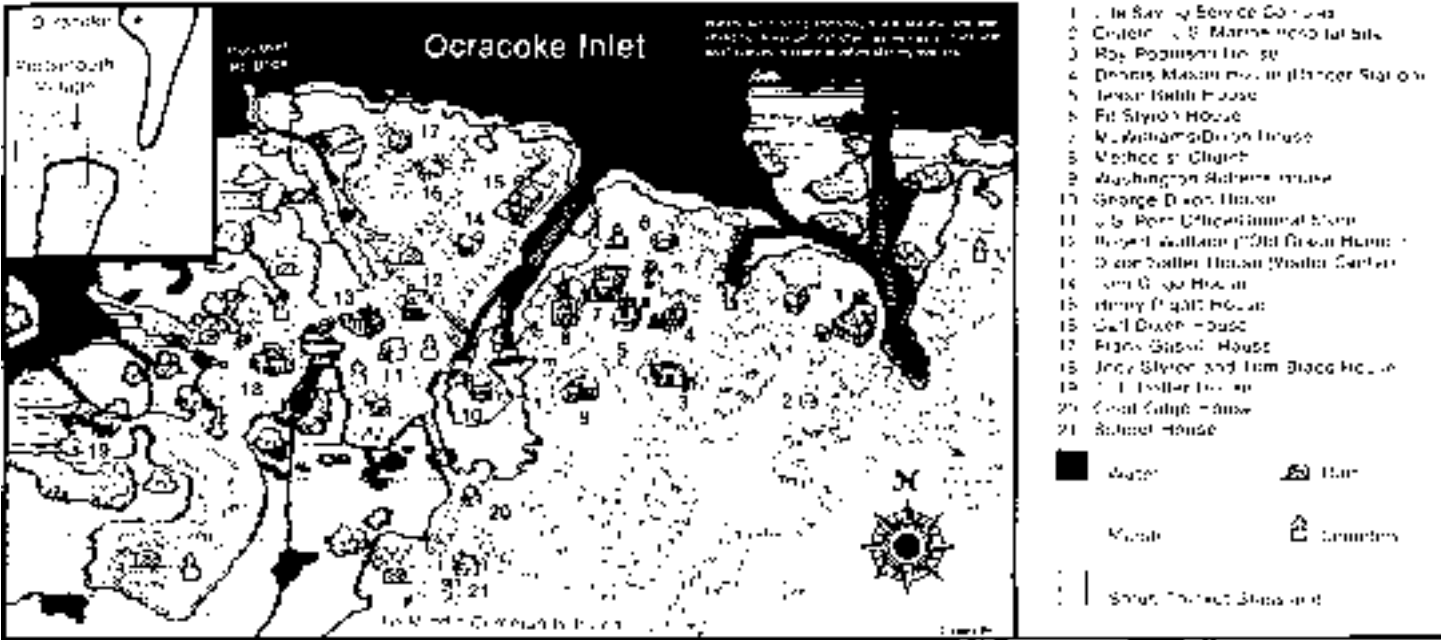
Public facilities are **limited**. Be sure to bring insect repellent, drinking water, food, sunscreen, adequate clothing, hat and good walking shoes. Be prepared for notorious mosquitos and unpredictable weather. Compost bathrooms are located on the beach road past the Life Saving Station. There are bathrooms in the Life Saving Station and Salter-Dixon house.

The village trails can be difficult to walk due to standing water and sandy soils.

Buildings are not wheelchair accessible. Camping is not allowed in the historic district. Pets are allowed on the seashore on a six-foot leash. Pets are prohibited on public ferries.

Portsmouth Village is a protected historic and archeological site. Please do not disturb artifacts, burials or any portion of any historic ruin or site. Any person who, without an official permit, injures, destroys, excavates or removes any historic ruin, artifact or object of antiquity on public lands of the United States of America is subject to arrest and penalty of law. Help the National Park Service protect and maintain this rich cultural site for future visitors by reporting any violation or suspected violation you observe to your nearest National Park Service Office.

Portsmouth Village Map



...for more information:

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