

Cape Lookout

National Seashore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cape Lookout Lighthouse



“it is supposed there is no part of the American Coast where vessels are more exposed to shipwreck, than they are in passing along the shores of North Carolina, in the neighborhood of those shoals.”

1806 Report to U.S. Congress

To many of the ships that have passed by the Cape Lookout Lighthouse, the flash of the beacon has meant many things: a safe refuge in a storm, the ship was on the right course, or danger.

The lighthouses in the United States have played an important role in America’s maritime history, and Cape Lookout Lighthouse was part of that history. Storms, dangerous currents, and changing shoals in the area led to thousands of shipwrecks and gave the coast the nickname “Graveyard of the Atlantic.” The low-lying shoals off Cape Lookout were why the Cape Lookout Lighthouses were constructed.

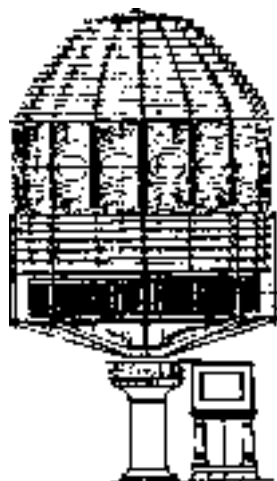
Two lights? In 1804, Congress authorized construction of a lighthouse at Cape Lookout. In 1812, the first lighthouse was completed at a cost of \$20, 578.54. It was a brick tower inside a wood frame building. The boarded exterior was shingled and painted with red and white stripes.

However, mariners found that the tower was too short and the beacon unreliable. Lieutenant H.J. Hartene, commanding a mail steamer, stated in 1851 that “...the lights at Hatteras, Lookout and Cape Florida, if not improved had be better dispensed with as the navigator is apt to run ashore looking for them.” Compounding with the problem of an inadequate light was the Keeper’s continuing battle with sand piling around the lighthouse making entry into the tower difficult.



In 1852, the establishment of the United States Lighthouse Service led to improvement in all lighthouse operations in the United States. For Cape Lookout, this would mean a new higher tower. Construction of the second lighthouse began in 1857; and on November 1, 1859, the lighthouse began operation. The red brick tower at Cape Lookout became the prototypal of all lighthouses erected on the Outer Banks. During the Civil War, the retreating Confederate forces attempted to blow up the lighthouse to render it inoperable. The blast damaged some stairs and the light. In 1863, the lighthouse underwent repairs to correct the damage.

The tower was painted with its distinctive black and white “diagonal checker-board” pattern in 1873. A new Keeper’s quarters was constructed at the same time. This building is the current visitor center.



Lights. The first lighthouse used a system of lights called parabolic reflectors, and 13 Argand oil burning lights. This system was used until 1856 when a Fresnel Lens (pronounced frennel) was installed. The lens was a first order, which is the largest of the lens system. The Fresnel lens system consists of seven orders or sizes. The first order light displayed a fixed or constant light that could be seen for 18 miles in good weather.

In 1933, the light was electrified. An incandescent oil vapor light was installed and now the light could be seen for 19 miles. In 1972, the first order Frensel lens was removed. Two airport beacons with 1000 watt lights were installed. Each lamp produces a beam of 800,000 candlepower, visible in good weather for 20 miles. It appears at a distance as a short flash at 15 second intervals. The light is on 24 hours a day.



Keepers. The people who maintained the lighthouses were called Keepers. Lighthouse Keepers were male and female, young and old. The duties of a keeper included: hand carrying fuel to the lantern room and fueling the lamp; trimming the wicks (later, replacing mantles and pumping up the oil vaporizer); regularly cleaning and polishing (with jeweler's rouge and whiting) the glass chimney, lenses and windows; polishing vast amounts of brass fittings and tools; cranking up the weight set that turned the lens, latching it and letting it free when the lamp was lit; closing lantern room curtains by day to prevent damage from the magnified sunlight through the lens and discoloration of the lens glass; cleaning and lubricating the gearbox that operated the light; painting the structure; routine maintenance and repairs of all the buildings; greeting and sometimes lodging visitors and inspectors; writing reports, keeping records and ordering supplies; and monitoring the light and nearby shipping at night. Keepers worked 24 hours on and 48 hours off. For these duties, they received \$600 a year as their salary.

Changes. The days of the lighthouse keeper have passed. In 1950, the light was automated and the need for the faithful lighthouse keeper passed into history at Cape Lookout.

The National Park Service's role. In 1966, Cape Lookout National Seashore was authorized by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Cape Lookout Lighthouse is within the boundaries of the national seashore. However, the United States Coast Guard owns and operates the lighthouse.

The Keeper's Quarters Visitor Center is located in the former Duplex Keeper's Quarters near the base of the tower. There are exhibits that tell the story of the lighthouse. The story of the lighthouse and its keepers continues.

Another type of light. In 1892, a recommendation was made for a lightship to be placed near the Cape Lookout Shoals. In early 1904, a temporary lightship was stationed. On December 19, 1904, a permanent lightship was stationed and would remain until 1933 when it was assigned to Winter Quarter Shoals, off the Virginia coast.



*Cape Lookout Lightship
Early 1900s*

Lightships were hard to maintain due to buffeting of storms. Cape Lookout Lightship was no exception. From 1913-1916, the ship would lose anchor and chains and be driven off its post several times.

The lighthouse today. Today the light is fully automated and not open to the public as it is considered an active working aid to navigation. The Fresnel lens was removed in 1972 and put into storage in Portsmouth, Virginia. In the early 1990's, it was called out of storage and placed in Block Island (Southeast Light) Lighthouse, Rhode Island.

Take a walk around the grounds of the lighthouse and try to imagine yourself as a lighthouse keeper at Cape Lookout. Imagine yourself making the climb up the 201 cast iron steps carrying kerosene to the light. Try to capture in your mind having to keep the light operating in a hurricane. Lighthouses and keepers played an important role in America's maritime history. Stop and take time to appreciate how important that role was.

For More Information:

**Cape Lookout National Seashore
131 Charles Street
Harkers Island, NC 28531**

252-728-2250

or check the Internet for our home page at www.nps.gov/cal/

