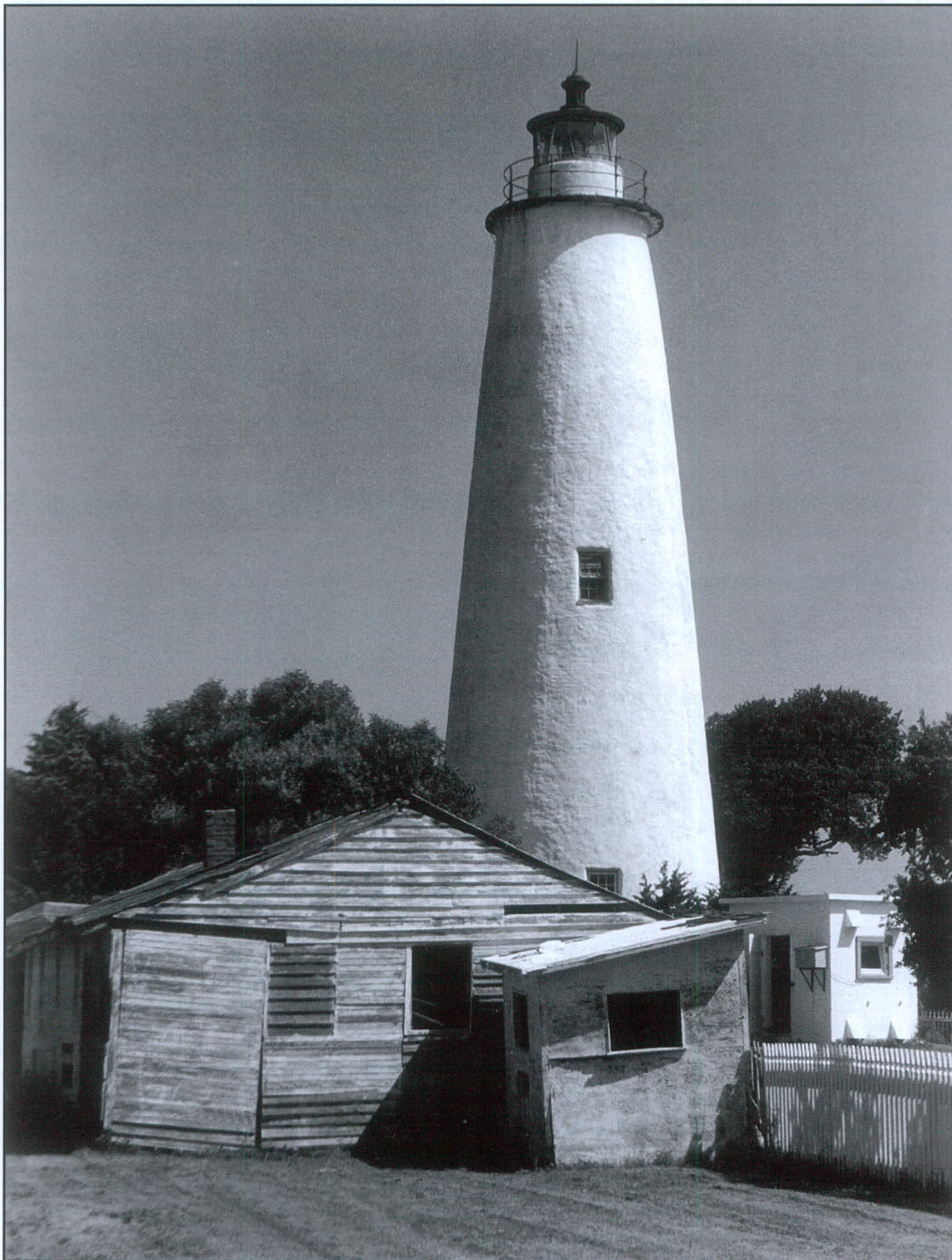


OCRACOKE LIGHTHOUSE:

A History of North Carolina's Oldest Operational Lighthouse

by Jim Utter



A recent photograph of Ocracoke Lighthouse. Note the small lantern, which replaced the original in the 1850s. The small building next to the tower is the old oil house, which now houses the automation equipment. (Courtesy of Bruce Aydelotte)



earing its 175th birthday, the Ocracoke Lighthouse continues to provide a sense of security and continuity to the 800 or so permanent residents of Ocracoke Village, located on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Ocracoke Lighthouse is the oldest operational lighthouse in North Carolina, constructed in 1823. Only Bald Head Island Lighthouse, located south of Wilmington, North Carolina, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, is older, built in 1817. But Bald Head is no longer an active aid to navigation.

The present lighthouse on Ocracoke is not the first, but its history is mired in what could have been. A 1789 session of the North Carolina General Assembly provided

legislation to "Erect a Lighthouse on Ocracoke Island" (The spelling of "Ocracoke" has changed many times, including "Okok" and "Ocacock"). The act emphasized construction of a lighthouse on the island would improve safety of vessels "bound over Ocacock Bar." A special duty on any vessel of 20 tons or more crossing the bar — threepence per ton on all vessels belonging to the United States and sixpence per ton on foreign vessels — would help finance the lighthouse's construction.

A deed gift of one acre of land was obtained by the state in November 1789 for the purpose of erecting a lighthouse. However, the U. S. Congress, in August of 1789, had passed legislation relieving individual states of the responsibility for building and maintaining lighthouses. In 1790, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a

law requiring the governor to transfer both the Bald Head and Ocracoke Lighthouse sites to the federal government.

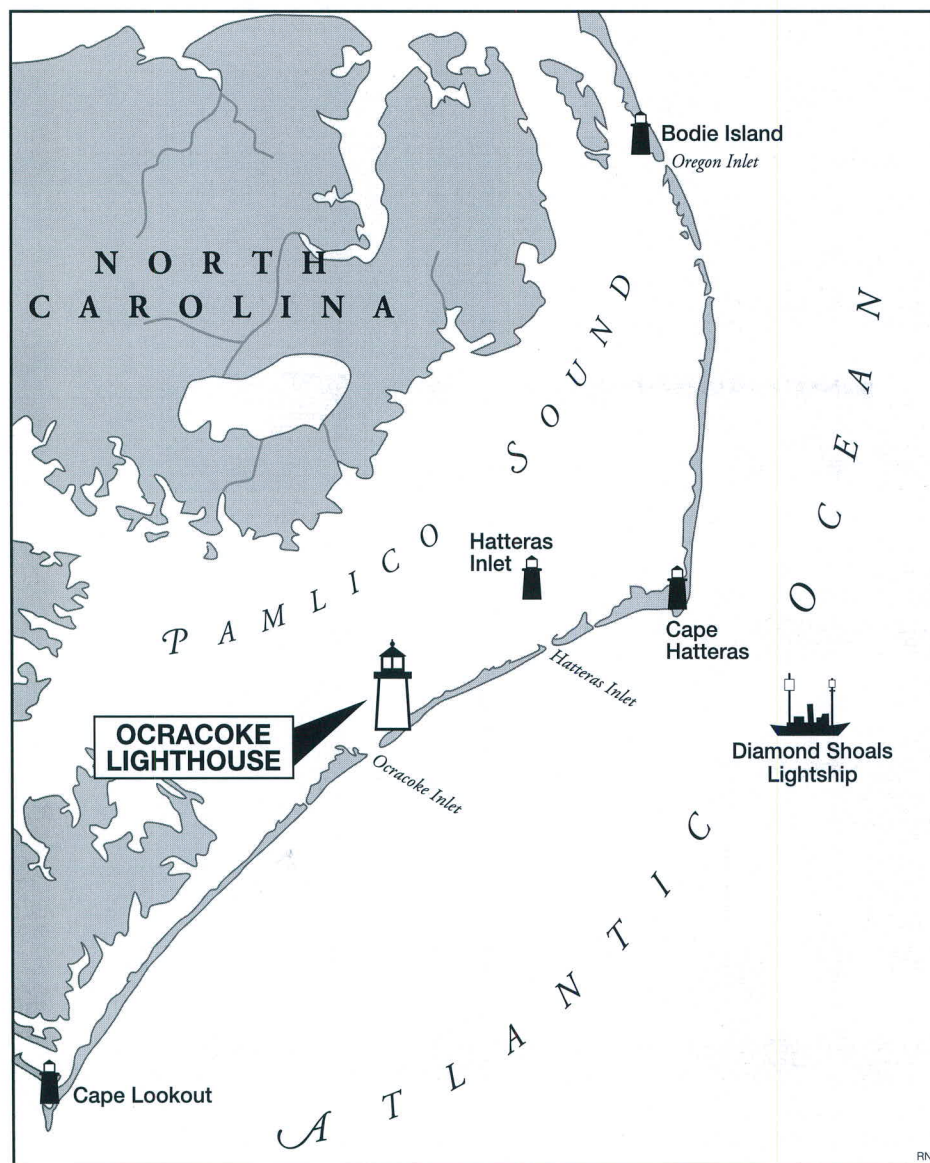
The original Bald Head Lighthouse was completed in 1795, but construction of a lighthouse on Ocracoke proceeded much more slowly. By the late 1790s Ocracoke Inlet had become a booming shipping and maritime center. In fact, the town of Portsmouth, located on the south side of the inlet, was one of the largest on the North Carolina coast at the time. Congress, however, passed on the land on Ocracoke Island and instead authorized construction in May of 1794,

"on an island in the harbor of Ocracoke called Shell Castle, a lighted beacon of wooden frame, 55 feet high, to be 22 feet at the base, and to be reduced gradually to 12 feet at the top, exclusive of the lantern, which shall be made to contain one large lamp, with four wicks."

Early histories are unclear as to when this Shell Castle light was first illuminated, but it is believed to be between 1800 and 1803. Thus, North Carolina mariners were provided their first coastal aid to navigation for which they so desperately had lobbied.

This Shell Castle light soon became useless, as the changing sand bars and channels made it a distance of one mile from the main inlet. The light remained in operation until destroyed by lightning in August of 1818. In May 1820, \$14,000.00 was appropriated by Congress for a light vessel to be stationed in Ocracoke Inlet. The vessel proved equally unreliable and an additional \$20,000.00 was approved for construction on May 7, 1822 of a lighthouse on Ocracoke Island — 33 years after land was first obtained on the island for the purpose of building a lighthouse. The federal government lost its deed for the original one acre of land when it failed to build a lighthouse on the land by 1801.

The Congressional authorization for the new Ocracoke light house provided in part, "That, as soon as the jurisdiction of such portions of land at or near the port of Ocracoke, or some place in the vicinity, as the President shall select for the site of a lighthouse, shall be ceded to and the property thereof vested in the United States, it shall be the duty of the Treasury to provide, by contract, which shall be approved by the President, for building a lighthouse on such site, to be so lighted as



to be distinguished from other lighthouses near the same; and also to agree for the salaries, wages or hire of the persons to be appointed by the President for the superintendence of the same."

The 76-foot white conical lighthouse was constructed in 1823 by Noah Porter of Massachusetts at a cost of \$11,359.35, which included the cost of the keeper's quarters (a one-story three room brick house). Land was purchased from Jacob Gaskill for \$50.00 on a site, within the village, near the harbor known as Silver Lake. The land was described as follows:

"Beginning at a cedar post on the north side of the road, Jacob Gaskill's corner, thence running a due north course along his line twenty-five and a half poles to a cedar post, thence a due east course twelve and three quarter poles to a cedar post, thence due south twenty-five and a half poles, thence due west to the first station."

It was on this two-acre tract of land that the Ocracoke Lighthouse was built.

An 1854 report of the Lighthouse Board indicated that at Ocracoke Island a fourth order Fresnel fixed white light was substituted for the previous reflecting illuminating apparatus. In 1855 the keeper's dwelling and tower were thoroughly repaired.

In 1860 new lanterns were placed in the Ocracoke lighthouse — Franklin lamps substituted for valve lamps. The lens of the tower was removed in 1862 but refitted and re-exhibited in 1863. Extensive repairs were also made to the tower in 1868 and a second floor was added to the keeper's dwelling in 1887. In 1899, new model fourth order lamps were supplied and various repairs made. A plank walk was laid in 1903 from the dwelling to the tower.

By 1930, the lighthouse property on Ocracoke Island was listed as and appraised as the following:

1 lighthouse	\$16,050.00
1 oil house	500.00
1 dwelling	5,670.00
1 dwelling	7,000.00
1 coal shed	400.00
Total	\$29,620.00

The land was valued at \$1,000.00.

After World War II, the lighthouse underwent major renovation. The wooden stairs were replaced with a spiral stairway

made of steel, and the keeper's dwelling was remodeled for use by officers of the U. S. Coast Guard Station on Ocracoke. Lighthouse keepers lived in the home until the light was automated in 1946.

There have been, of course, many keepers who have worked at the Ocracoke station. Records of those serving before 1847 are virtually non-existent. Even for those since 1847 the record keeping varied greatly from keeper to keeper.

For instance, Captain Leon Wesley Austin, who served at Ocracoke from 1912 to 1929 made an entry in his log book every day. Most tell of the daily weather or some of

the various chores Austin performed each day. Captain Joe Burrus, who served from 1929 to 1946 made few entries in his log book, however. It was said he refused to make entries because it was a waste of good time. He claimed he had much more important things to do.

Burrus was an excellent example of the many native Outer Banks residents who went on to serve in the Lighthouse Service. Born in Hatteras, North Carolina, Burrus served the Lighthouse Service for 45 years. He served as keeper of lighthouses in Virginia and North Carolina. His paycheck back in 1903 was \$30.00 per month. Over



Above and below - The Ocracoke Light Station, May 24, 1893. The small building at left, in the lower photograph, is probably a summer kitchen. Also note the keeper in uniform, his wife, and, probably, his daughter. (U. S. Lighthouse Society archives)



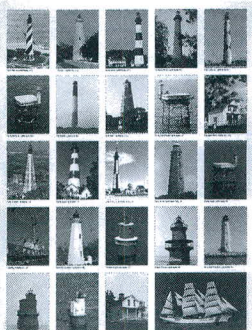
the years he was stationed at Tangier, Virginia, Thimble Shoal, Virginia, and Diamond Shoal Lightship, Cape Lookout, Croatan, Oliver's Reef, Bluff Shoal, and Ocracoke, all in North Carolina. Burrus was the last keeper of the Ocracoke Lighthouse as there was no longer a need for a keeper at Ocracoke after automation of the station in 1946.

Today, Ocracoke Lighthouse is equipped with an 8,000 candlepower fixed white light, visible up to 14 miles at sea. The light burns from late afternoon to early morning each day. A white picket fence surrounds the entire lighthouse complex — it has remained closed to the public since World War II. Members of the public are allowed to stroll the grounds, however. The lighthouse and surrounding structures have been placed on the National Register of Historical Places. Nearly 33,000 people visit the station annually — not exactly an easy task as Ocracoke Island is accessible only by ferry.

The lighthouse compound is now owned by the Coast Guard, which is responsible for the operation and maintenance of the light house. The keeper's quarters are used by the National Park Service, which has responsibility for its maintenance through an agreement with the Coast Guard. In 1990, \$278,000.00 was spent to rehabilitate the interior of the keeper's quarters. The Coast Guard and Cape Hatteras National Seashore continue to negotiate the possible transfer of the Ocracoke lighthouse and grounds to the National Park Service.

As one of America's great historic lighthouses, Ocracoke claims many superlatives. Unlike most of North Carolina's famous lights, which are all-brick structures, the exterior of Ocracoke is covered in masonry. It is the oldest operational lighthouse in North Carolina and is also the shortest navigational light on the Atlantic coast. But for nearly 175 years, the residents of this quaint coastal village have known it simply as a signal for home.

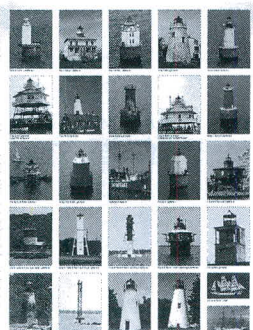
For more information on visiting Ocracoke Island and the Ocracoke Lighthouse, contact the Ocracoke Island Visitor Center, N.C. 12, Ocracoke, N.C. 27968; or call (919) 928-4531.



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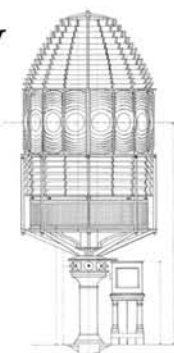
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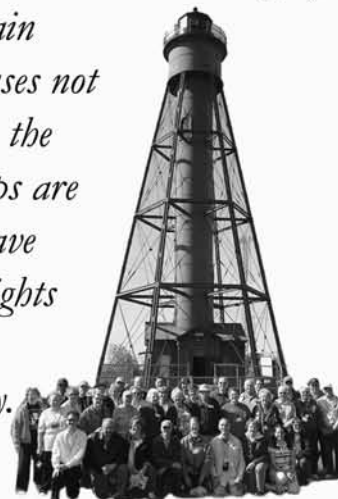
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