

Lighthouses Keep Watch Over the North Carolina Coast

This is Shirley Griffith.

And this is Steve Ember with the VOA Special English program, EXPLORATIONS. Today we tell about the lighthouses that protect ships sailing along the coast of North Carolina.

Lighthouses are built along coasts to signal to passing ships. Lighthouses are tall buildings of wood or stone or brick with large bright lights on top. Every night they shine lights to warn ships about dangerous areas where there are rocks, low water levels, or strong currents. The lighthouses along North Carolina’s coast are recognized as signs of safety for travelers at sea.



The Bodie Island lighthouse

Over the years, fierce ocean storms have sent many ships crashing into the North Carolina coast. Other boats have been lost in wars. During World War Two, for example, German submarines sank many allied transport ships in that area. History experts say more than 600 ships have been wrecked near the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Storms still uncover the ruins of wrecked ships along the Outer

Banks.

The lighthouses shine their signals to prevent more wrecks. Many ships and lives have been saved because of the United States Life Saving Service and workers at lighthouses along the coast.

The Outer Banks is a group of narrow islands stretching along the North Carolina coast in the Atlantic Ocean. The islands shelter North Carolina’s inland water passages. For thousands of years, these barrier islands have survived severe weather. Every few years, an ocean storm in the North Atlantic Ocean will move through the Outer Banks with destructive force.

Each island of the Outer Banks has its own lighthouse with a special design and history. In addition, each lighthouse has its own signal which boats see from a distance. The different light signals help sailors identify their position from the land. This helps them judge if they are close to dangerous water

passages. Today, the light signals work on an electrical timing system. In the past, workers living in the lighthouses had to turn the lights on and off.

North Carolina’s simplest lighthouse is on Ocracoke Island in the southern Outer Banks. Ocracoke Lighthouse was built in 1823. It is considered the oldest lighthouse on the Carolina coast. Its signal is a continuous white light, which can be seen almost 25 kilometers out at sea. Although the plans used to build Ocracoke lighthouse appear normal, the building was built off-center. As a result, it rises more sharply on one side.

Ocracoke Island is said to be the place where the pirate Blackbeard lost his head in the early 1700s. This famous ocean robber was killed in a battle with a British officer more than a century before Ocracoke Lighthouse was built. Lieutenant Robert Maynard was protecting England’s colonial interest in the New World. Historians say he tricked Blackbeard into battle and then cut off his head. Stories passed down through the years say that the spirit of Blackbeard still walks around Ocracoke Island searching for his head.

Many people agree that the most recognized lighthouse in America is at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The building stretches 58 meters in the air – making it the tallest brick lighthouse in the country. It was completed in 1870. Its signal shines a white light every seven-and-a-half seconds. Ships 37 kilometers from land are able to see the signal.

Historians believe more people have read about, painted or taken pictures of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse than any other lighthouse in North America. It is the picture on the official documents of the United States Lighthouse Service. It is also a memorial to hundreds of men and women who worked to make North Carolina’s coast safe for sea travelers.

In 1999, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was moved more than 900 meters. Officials wanted to protect the building by moving it farther away from the ocean. Huge lift equipment picked up the more than 4,000 ton building and carried it inland. The lighthouse was then lowered onto a new 18-meter square concrete support structure.

Engineers inspected the repositioned building. They declared that it is standing tall and strong on its new foundation. Visitors can climb to the top of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse, but they need to be in good physical condition. This is because 268 steps lead to the top of North America’s tallest brick lighthouse.

Another lighthouse along North Carolina’s Outer Banks is the Bodie

Lighthouse. Its history is quite interesting. The fifth financial inspector of the United States Treasury Department built the first Bodie Lighthouse in 1848.

Stephen Pleasonton’s main concern while building the structure was to save money. As a result, his workers were not permitted to spend enough money to build a safe base. In addition, the building was fitted with a light system that was not considered effective even then. Shortly after it opened, Bodie Island Lighthouse started sinking on one side. Workers soon had to leave it.

Several years later, the United States Congress ordered a new lighthouse be built. In 1852, work began on a new and improved structure. The second Bodie Lighthouse was to be representative of a new look in lighthouses. It was shaped like a circular cone, made of earthen bricks made hard in a fire. Its base was built on supporting bars driven into the earth.

The second Bodie Lighthouse was destroyed in the American Civil War. Confederate soldiers from the south wrecked the building to prevent the Union navy of the north from gaining a position to help its ships. The structure was finally rebuilt and completed in 1872. It rises 48 meters in the air.

Today, the Bodie Lighthouse needs several repairs. This is why the building is not open to the public to climb. However, the lighthouse is still recognized by passing ships.

The most northern lighthouse on North Carolina’s Outer Banks is at Currituck Beach. Like the other lighthouses along the coast, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse still serves as an aid to sailors. The lighthouse runs its light signal from sunset to sunrise. The signal is three seconds on, 17 seconds off. The light can be seen as far away as 33 kilometers.

The Currituck Beach Lighthouse remains unpainted to help tell it apart from other lighthouses along the coast. This also gives visitors a strong sense of the one-and-a-half-million bricks used to build the building, which stands 47 meters in the air. The Currituck Beach Lighthouse was completed in 1875. It was the last major brick lighthouse built on the Outer Banks. Visitors are permitted to climb to the top.

Wild horses run free near the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. Horses are not native to North America. Yet for more than 400 years, these animals have run unrestricted along the northern Outer Banks. Historians are not sure how the horses first arrived in America. They believe either Spanish or English settlers transported them. The wild horses are called Barbs. They are

known for their size, their ability to work hard, their easy movement, and their long lives.

Historians say there was nothing but sea, sand and grass when these Barb horses first arrived on the Outer Banks. A continual increase in summer visitors over the past 40 years has made survival for the horses more difficult. Because of this, a group of concerned citizens has built a fence to separate the horses from people. This gives the about six-thousand hectares of land to live on. The group is trying to make sure the animals will be permitted to stay on Currituck Beach. Like the lighthouses, the wild Barb horses are a traditional part of life on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.