

CAPE HATTERAS LIGHTHOUSE

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## Photo By: Arvil Stephens

On July 10, 1797, Congress appropriated \$44,000 "for erecting a lighthouse on the head land of Cape Hatteras and a lighted beacon on Shell Castle Island, in the harbor of Ocracoke in the State of North Carolina." The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse cost \$14,302 to build and the Shell Castle Island Lighthouse was built from part of the surplus. Both were completed in 1803.

The Cape Hatteras light marked very dangerous shoals which extend from the cape for a distance of 10 nautical miles. The original tower was built of dark sandstone and retained its natural color. The original light consisted of 18 lamps; with 14-inch reflectors, and was 112 feet above sea level. It was visible in clear weather for a distance of 18 miles.

In July 1851, Lt. David D. Porter, USN, reported as follows:

"Hatteras light, the most important on our coast is, without doubt, the worst light in the world. Cape Hatteras is the point made by all vessels going to the south, and also coming from that direction; the current of the Gulf Stream runs so close to the outer point of the shoals that vessels double as close round the breakers as possible, to avoid its influence. The only guide they have is the light, to tell them when up with the shoals; but I have always had so little confidence in it, that I have been guided by the lead, without the use of which, in fact, no vessel should pass Hatteras. The first nine trips I made I never saw Hatteras light at all, though frequently passing in sight of the breakers, and when I did see it, I could not tell it from a steamer's light, excepting that the steamer's lights are much brighter. It has improved much latterly, but is still a wretched light. It is all important that Hatteras should be provided with a revolving light of great intensity, and that the light be raised 15 feet higher than at present. Twenty-four steamship's lights, of great brilliancy, pass this point in one month, nearly at the rate of one every night (they all pass at night) and it can be seen how easily a vessel may be deceived by taking a steamer's light for a light on shore."

The improvement in the light referred to had begun in 1845 when the reflectors were changed from 14 to 15 inch. In 1848 the 18 lamps were changed to 15 lamps with 21-inch reflectors and the light had become visible in clear weather at a distance of 20 miles. In 1854 a first-order Fresnel lens with flashing white light was substituted for the old reflecting apparatus, and the tower was raised to 150 feet.

In 1860 the Lighthouse Board reported that Cape Hatteras Lighthouse required protection, due to the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1862 the Board reported "Cape Hatteras, lens and lantern destroyed, light reexhibited."

Between 1867 and 1870 Congress appropriated \$167,000 in three annual sums, for rebuilding Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. The new tower, from which the first-order light was first exhibited December 16, 1871, was the highest brick lighthouse tower in the world. It was 193 feet above ground and the focal height of the light 191 feet above water. The old tower "being no longer of any use and in danger of falling during some heavy storm" was blown up and totally destroyed in February 1872.

In the spring of 1879 the tower was struck by lightning. Cracks subsequently appeared in the masonry walls, which was remedied by placing a METAL rod to connect the iron work of the tower with an iron disk sunk in the ground. In 1912 the candlepower of the light was increased from 27,000 to 80,000.

Ever since the completion of the new tower in 1870, there had begun a very gradual encroachment of the sea upon the beach. This did not become serious, however, until 1919, when the high water line had advanced to about 300 feet from the base of the tower. Since that time the surf had gnawed steadily toward the base of

the tower until in 1935, the site was finally reached by the surf. Several attempts were made to arrest this erosion, but dikes and breakwaters had been of no avail. In 1935, therefore, the tower light was replaced by a light on a skeleton steel tower placed farther back from the sea on a sand dune, 166 feet above the sea, and visible for 19 miles. The old tower was then abandoned to the custody of the National Park Service.

The Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration erected a series of wooden revetments which checked the wash that was carrying away the beach. In 1942 the Coast Guard reassumed its control over the tower and manned it as a lookout station until 1945. The old tower was now 500 to 900 feet inland from the sea and again tenable as a site for the light which was placed in commission January 23, 1950.

The new light consists of a 36-inch aviation-type rotating beacon of 250,000 candlepower, visible 20 miles, and flashing white every 15 seconds. The skeleton steel tower has been retained to guard against the time that the brick tower may again be endangered by erosion and thus require that the light again be moved. (1)  
(2)

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