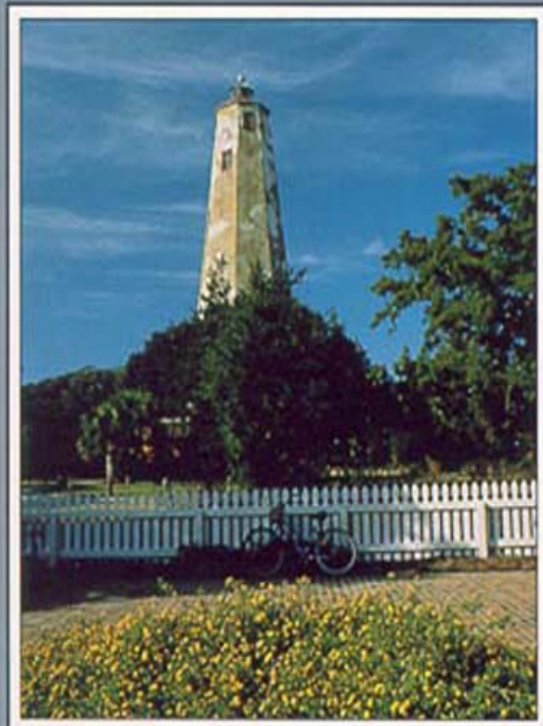
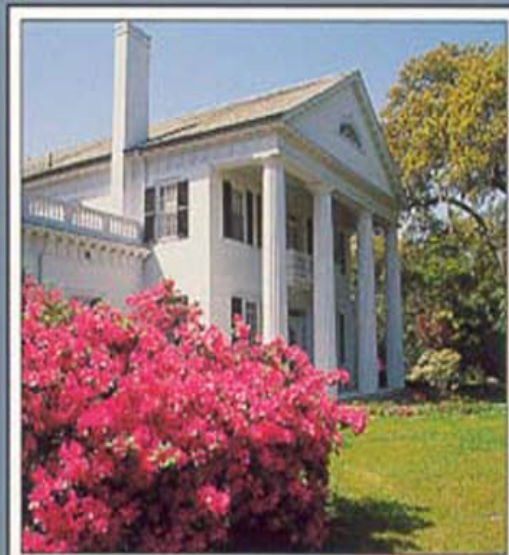
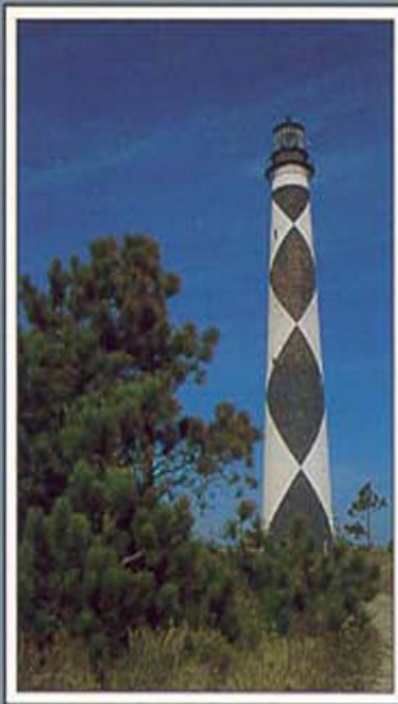


DANIEL W. BAREFOOT

# Touring the Backroads of North Carolina's Lower Coast



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*Touring the  
Backroads of  
North  
Carolina's  
Lower Coast*

ALSO BY DANIEL W. BAREFOOT

*Touring the Backroads of North Carolina's Upper Coast*

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*Touring the  
Backroads of  
North  
Carolina's  
Lower Coast*

Daniel W. Barefoot



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Clockwise from top left—  
Battleship *North Carolina*, from The Cape Fear Riverfront Tour  
Cape Lookout Lighthouse, from The Cape Lookout National Seashore Tour  
Orton Plantation, from The Cape Fear Riverfront Tour  
A lower coast sunset  
Tryon Palace, from The New Bern Tour  
Bald Head Island Lighthouse, from The Cape Fear Delta Tour

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*To Kay and Kristie for all of the many  
happy miles we've traveled*

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# *Table of Contents*

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Preface

Acknowledgments

The Cape Lookout National Seashore Tour

The Down East Carteret Tour

The Beaufort Tour

The Crystal Coast Tour

The New Bern Tour

The Onslow Bay Tour

The Topsail Area Tour

The Wilmington Tour

The Wrightsville Beach to Pleasure Island Tour

The Cape Fear Riverfront Tour

The Cape Fear Delta Tour

The Brunswick Islands Tour

The Land of Waccamaw Tour

Appendix

Bibliography

Index

# Preface

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*And beyond this we saw the open Countrey rising in height above the sandie shore with many faire fields and plains ... as pleasant and delectable to behold, as is possible to imagine.*

Report of  
Giovanni da Verrazano  
to King Francis I of France,  
July 8, 1524

In 1961, Governor Terry Sanford made a plea to the citizens of North Carolina to raise money to save the USS *North Carolina*, the world's first modern battleship, from the scrap heap. As a ten-year-old fourth-grader, I took pride in joining thousands of other schoolchildren all over the state in contributing our nickels and dimes to help bring the great battle wagon to its permanent home on the North Carolina coast at Wilmington.

I well recall the sense of pride and awe that overwhelmed me when I first visited the *North Carolina* after she was dedicated as a war memorial in 1962. Little did I know that, some three decades later, I would be appointed by Governor Jim Hunt to the commission which oversees the operation and maintenance of the majestic ship.

It is with the same sense of pride and awe that I regard the North Carolina coast, the land from whence my grandparents, their parents, and their grandparents came. Indeed, North Carolinians from Manteo to Murphy and people the world over have for centuries been awed by and proud of the North Carolina coast—a land of incomparable natural beauty and great historic significance.

Despite the lavish praise conferred upon the area by the great European explorers of the sixteenth century, the North Carolina coast remained the Rip Van Winkle of the Atlantic seaboard in terms of development until the second half of the twentieth century. During the intervening three and a half centuries, the other Atlantic states witnessed the birth and growth of the great American cities, ports, and resorts along their shores, while North Carolina, because of its unique geography, saw its beautiful barrier islands preserved in their natural state. Treacherous offshore shoals, shallow sounds, and hundreds of nooks and crannies along the irregular North Carolina coast won it dubious acclaim as a pirate haven and a graveyard for ships.

But the centuries of isolation and relative obscurity have now proved to be a blessing. Where much of the Atlantic coastline displays the telltale signs of rampant, unplanned development, the North Carolina coast has been largely spared the engineering nightmares evident on the coast of the states to the north and south.

Millions of people travel to coastal North Carolina annually to enjoy the land which has enchanted visitors since the early European explorers. Much of the attraction lies with the unspoiled conditions. Tourists from throughout the United States and from distant parts of the globe revel in the miles of majestic, uncrowded strand, the vast public parks and wildlife refuges, the multitude of family-oriented resorts, and the historic cities and towns, all of which seem to exist in harmony with the natural forces at work on the slender barrier islands and along the sounds, creeks, and other estuaries.

North Carolina possesses the sixth-largest coastline in the United States, following only Alaska, Florida, Louisiana, Maine, and California. Its 301-mile-long coast comprises more than a fourth of the total coast of the original thirteen English colonies. Accordingly, the vast size of the North Carolina coast has necessitated the publication of two volumes of tours.



This volume contains thirteen tours of the lower coast—tours of the barrier islands lying south of Ocracoke Inlet and the portion of the mainland south of the Neuse River.

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In July 1524, the famed Florentine navigator Giovanni da Verrazano became the first European to explore the coast of North Carolina when he came ashore somewhere between Masonboro Island and Bogue Banks. His narrative on the lower North Carolina coast is the earliest known description of the shores of what is now the United States.

It is not surprising, then, that the lower North Carolina coast is steeped in history and legend. Over the past fifteen years, I have traveled extensively over the backroads of this unique region to collect stories and bring coastal history to life.

Too often, coastal visitors in a hurry to reach the beach resorts speed by fascinating towns, historic sites, and natural areas without understanding their significance, without partaking of their beauty and charm, and without sampling their briny flavor. And even at the beach resorts, there are intriguing backroads with stories that have either been neglected by historians or forgotten as the region has grown more sophisticated.

As you travel the backroads on these tours, please remember that *change* is a watchword along the coast. While I have taken great care to make the information presented herein as accurate as possible, road numbers change, roads and bridges are rerouted, and historic buildings and other landmarks vanish almost overnight.

This book and its companion volume on the upper coast are not meant to be exhaustive histories of the North Carolina coast. Nor have they been written to provide details on lodging, dining, and shopping facilities. Such information changes constantly and is available from the sources listed in the appendix. Rather, the purpose of these volumes is to introduce the coastal visitor—whether armchair or automobile—to the places, the people, and the events that have indeed made the North Carolina coast “as pleasant and delectable to behold, as is possible to imagine.”

# Acknowledgments

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This book is the realization of one of my fondest dreams: a great, abiding desire to tell the fascinating stories of the North Carolina coast. The realization of my dream has not been achieved without the dedication, assistance, and kindness of many people. To name everyone who has helped this effort would be impossible, but there are some special people to whom I am especially indebted.

In the entire world, there are no more gracious people than those who live on the North Carolina coast. Whether I was in a library researching local history, on a backroad seeking directions, or at a rural church hoping to get inside on a weekday, the people of the coast were always genuinely interested in lending a helping hand.

The staffs at the North Carolina Collection and the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at the State Archives in Raleigh were helpful and considerate on each of my many visits.

The folks at John F. Blair, Publisher, have been a real pleasure to work with throughout this project. In the fine tradition begun by Mr. Blair more than forty years ago, they are truly dedicated to publishing quality books on the history, geography, and culture of North Carolina and the Southeast.

Carolyn Sakowski, the president of Blair and the author of the first book in the *Touring the Backroads* series, saw merit in my manuscript from the outset and has given much of her time and attention to the project from day one. Steve Kirk, my editor, has provided his professional advice and expertise with patience and a smile. Debbie Hampton, Judy Breakstone, Anne Schultz, and the rest of the staff at John F. Blair have worked to make this book a success.

In my hometown, I am grateful to my dear friends Judge John R. Friday and Darrell Harkey for their never-ending support and loyalty.

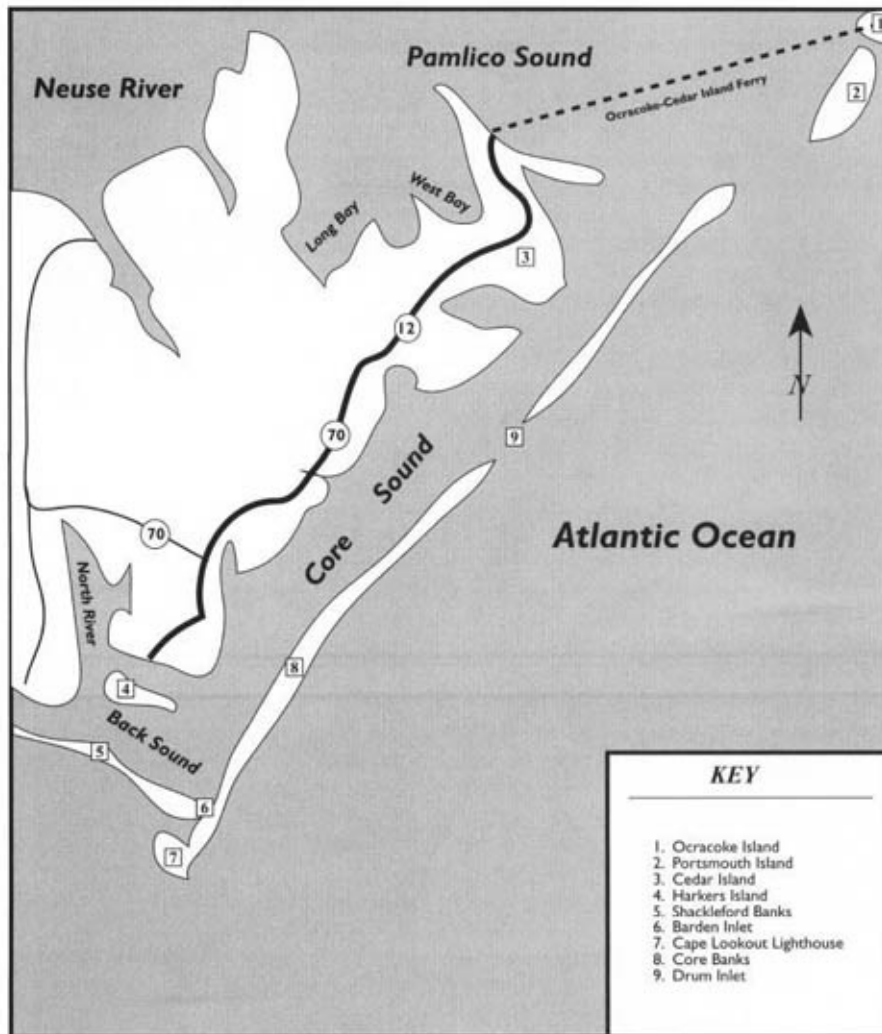
My family—my wife, my daughter, and my parents—have been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

Much of the original manuscript, written in my favorite No. 3 pencils, was typed by my daughter Kristie. Since her birth, Kristie has been a great travel companion for her parents, and the coast will always be a very special place for the three of us.

Above all, no one deserves more credit for this book than my wife, Kay. Over the course of this long project, she has traveled thousands of miles of coastal backroads and helped make the book as accurate as possible. She has endured hurricanes, torrential rainstorms, howling winds, sweltering heat, and pesky insects; she has asked for directions innumerable times; she has made hotel and ferry reservations; she has missed meals to get from one point to another; and she has read every word of the manuscript over and over and acted as my sounding board. In the bleak moments as well as the good, she has always been there with love, compliments, and patience.

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*Touring the  
Backroads of  
North  
Carolina's  
Lower Coast*



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## *The Cape Lookout National Seashore Tour*

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**B**ecause the barrier islands that comprise Cape Lookout National Seashore are separated from the mainland by deep inlets and sounds, the park can only be reached by boat. Ferries licensed by the National Park Service depart from Ocracoke, Atlantic, Davis, Harkers Island, and Beaufort to various portions of the park.

**This tour is comprised mainly of ferry rides and walking tours of the three sections of Cape Lookout National Seashore, with the only driving coming between ferry landings. It begins with a ferry ride from Ocracoke to Haulover Point on Portsmouth Island. After a walking tour in and around Portsmouth village, the tour returns to Ocracoke, then proceeds by a separate ferry to Cedar Island on the mainland. It then heads southwest by road to Harkers Island, where ferry service is available to Core Banks-the home of the famous Cape Lookout Lighthouse-and to Shackleford Banks.**

**Among the highlights of the tour are historic Portsmouth village, the story of Shell Castle Island, the Cape Lookout Lighthouse, North Carolina's finest harbor, and the story of Diamond City.**

**Total driving mileage: approximately 33 miles.**

There are no improved roads within the national seashore. Thus, only four-wheel-drive vehicles can operate in designated areas.

Visiting all three sections of Cape Lookout National Seashore involves considerable logistic difficulties. Taking this tour from start to finish requires a total of seven ferry rides. And it starts in Ocracoke, which itself is accessible only by ferry. Be sure to call in advance for ferry departure times.

Since you will not be able to complete this tour in a single day, you may want to partake of the lodgings in Ocracoke, Sea Level, Beaufort, Morehead City, or Harkers Island.

Also note that all of your travel within the national seashore will most likely be on foot.

Despite the travel difficulties, most people who make the trip to Portsmouth village or the Cape Lookout Lighthouse judge it well worth the effort. They are rewarded with a unique experience they are not likely to forget.

The tour begins at the ferry dock on Silver Lake in the village of Ocracoke. You can park your car nearby. Inquire at the National Park Service visitor center, located near the dock, for information about ferry service to Portsmouth Island.

The ferry ride from Ocracoke will deposit you at Haulover Point, located on the northwestern corner of Portsmouth Island, the northernmost island in Cape Lookout National Seashore.

On most maps and nautical charts, this 18-mile-long barrier island appears to be an expansive block of land. However, visitors find that much of it is nothing more than narrow, sandy barrier beach and marshland just above high water. Portsmouth Island is bounded on the north by Ocracoke Inlet, on the south by Drum Inlet, on the west by Pamlico Sound, and on the east by the Atlantic.

Haulover Point is an ancient landing that served as the gateway to the once-thriving, but now deserted, village of Portsmouth. Here, at its widest point, the island is 2 miles across. Residents of the Outer Banks and other coastal environs know a “haulover” as a shallow spot where it is necessary to actually pull a boat from one area of deep water to another. Much of the maritime history of Portsmouth village was played out at Haulover Point. More than a century ago, great wharves and warehouses stood here.

Clustered in the small village on the southern side of Ocracoke Inlet, twenty-one residents called Portsmouth home in 1946. One of those residents was Captain John Willis, a native of the island. When asked whether he thought that the population of Portsmouth Island was going to increase, Willis responded, “It surely looks that way now, and we people over there certainly hope it would. Wouldn’t you want our community to become a ghost town?”

Captain Willis’s prediction proved to be inaccurate. The population of the village dwindled until the early 1970s, when the last two residents of the island moved to the mainland. Today, the village still exists on the northern end of the island, but it has no inhabitants save National Park Service caretakers. It has become a true ghost town.

For most people, the term *ghost town* conjures up pictures of a ramshackle Western town with tumbleweeds blowing down a dusty street. Yet hardy seafaring men established Portsmouth village as one of coastal North Carolina’s oldest communities. Only through the cruel fate of human history are its houses now empty and its streets deserted.

To walk the sandy streets of the historic village, proceed south on Haulover Road. To the right of the road, in the direction of Pamlico Sound, you can see the remains of the Old Brick Road—the closest thing to a paved road that ever existed on the island. A number of houses, most of 1900 to 1930 vintage, are located on both sides of Haulover Road.

Near the point where the Old Brick Road merges with Haulover Road stands the Henry Babb House, one of the oldest houses on the island.

As you walk toward the former post-office building, take time to reflect on the three centuries of history to which these sandy lanes have been witness.



*The Henry Babb House*

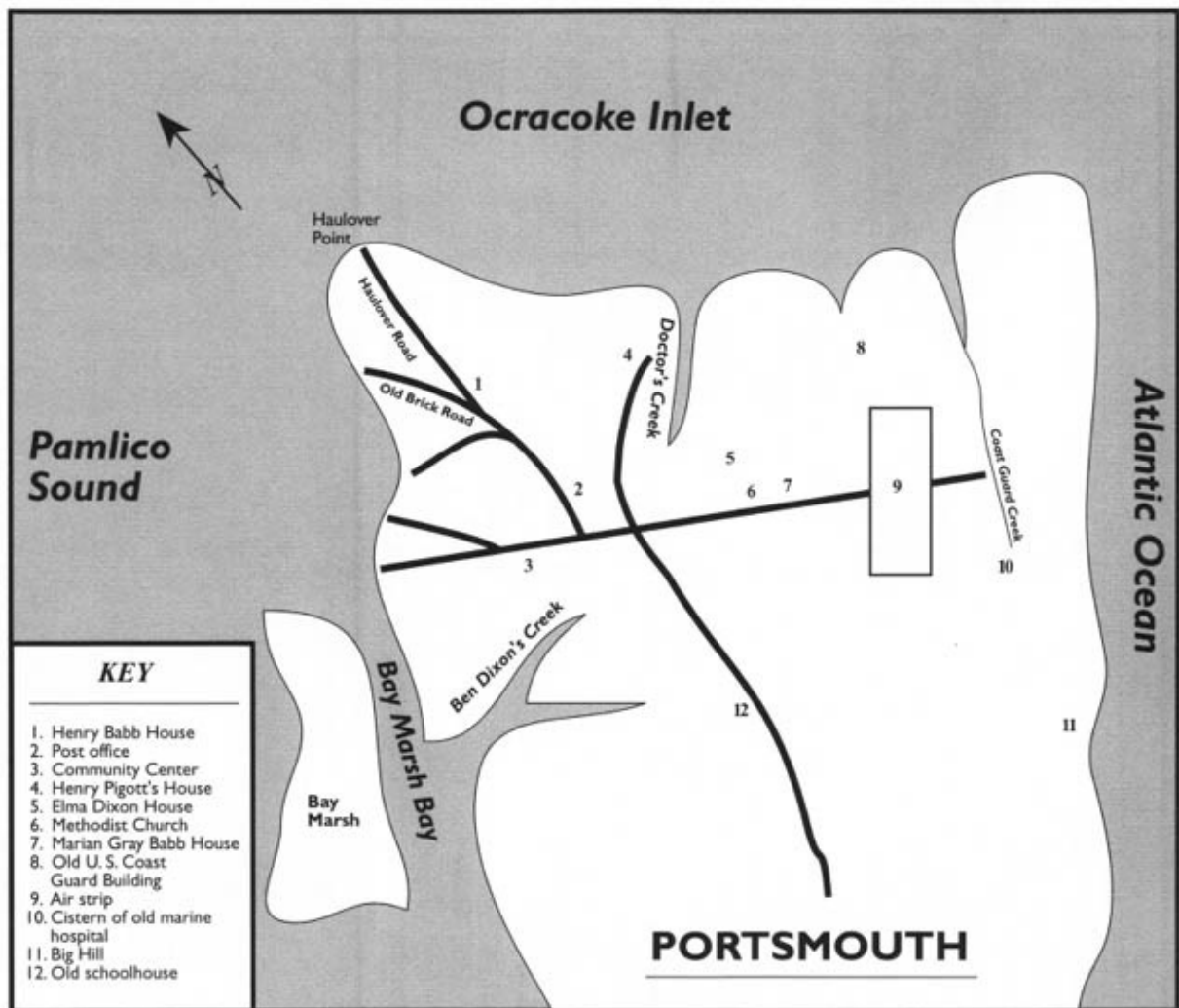
In the early part of the eighteenth century, long before a village was officially established

Portsmouth, John Lawson found English-speaking people living on the site. Apparently, the early inhabitants were mariners who settled near this, the site of North Carolina's earliest port activities. Indians also lived on the island at the time of Lawson's visit, and it is certain that they continued to inhabit the island into the nineteenth century.

Portsmouth village was an outgrowth of the desire of the North Carolina colonial government to provide facilities for the growing number of vessels using Ocracoke Inlet as a port of entry. By the middle of the eighteenth century, most of the water traffic from the populous ports of the colony was using Ocracoke Inlet. At that time, the main channel of the inlet was nearer Portsmouth Island than Ocracoke. Big oceangoing ships drew too much water to navigate the relatively shallow inlet. In order to establish a viable port at the inlet, colonial officials recognized the need for wharves, warehouses, and other port facilities where the cargo of the large ships could be unloaded and stored until it was loaded onto vessels capable of navigating the shallow sounds.

It was this process—called “lightering”—which prompted the colonial assembly to enact legislation in 1753 toward “laying out a Town on Core Banks, near Ocracoke Inlet, in Carteret County, and for appointing Commissioners for completing the Fort at or near the same place.” Before the town was settled, the legislators named it Portsmouth for the city of the same name in England.

Fort Granville, which never played an important role in coastal history, was completed by late 1755. History does not indicate that a gun was ever fired at the fort, but the men stationed there did provide a population base from which the village grew. No remains of the fort exist today.



By the time the first official census of the United States was completed in 1790, Portsmouth had

population of 227, making it the largest town on the Outer Banks. Portsmouth was unique because ~~unlike the other settlements on the Outer Banks, its future seemed to be filled with nothing but~~ promise.

Subject to severe shoaling and not very deep, Ocracoke Inlet never provided a good natural harbor. However, until a better harbor was available, the settlements near the inlet thrived. Of the three settlements—Portsmouth, Ocracoke, and nearby Shell Castle Island—Portsmouth was the most successful. It quickly grew to be the largest seaport between the Virginia capes and Charleston, South Carolina.

A school, shown as an “academy” on the Coles and Price map, existed in the village as early as 1806.

Due to the heavy port activity at Portsmouth, seamen with various ailments and diseases arrived here. In 1827, the federal government opened a crude hospital facility to quarantine sick sailors on the island. It was replaced in 1846 with a larger, more modern marine hospital that had numerous beds and was staffed by eighteen doctors. A post office, only the second in Carteret County, was opened in the village the same year.

However, another event in 1846 sounded the death knell for the future of Portsmouth as a major coastal port. Although the vicious coastal storm of 1846 did not do great physical damage to the village, it opened two new, deeper inlets on the Outer Banks—Oregon and Hatteras inlets. Suddenly, mariners had alternatives to Ocracoke Inlet.

Despite the threat of competition from the new inlets, Portsmouth was not yet down for the count. In fact, the village enjoyed one of its most prosperous periods from 1843 to 1860. The fact that seventy-seven children were enrolled in the village schools in 1846 attests to the vitality of the community.

In the early days of the Civil War, Confederate forces placed four guns on the beach at Portsmouth at an encampment called Fort Washington. The fort on nearby Beacon Island was burned and abandoned by Southern troops shortly after the fall of the forts at Hatteras Inlet in August 1862. Residents of Portsmouth panicked. A mass evacuation of the island began as Union ships appeared offshore.

Every resident was able to escape the island, save one Miss Rosie Gaskins. Rosie was a rather obese individual who could pass through only one door in her house: the extrawide back door. When the alarm spread that the Yankees were coming, the chubby lady became confused and attempted to leave her house through the front door. Rosie got stuck, and the more she squirmed to extricate herself, the more trapped she became. When Union forces arrived in the village, they found the woman still wedged in her front door. They removed her from her predicament and allowed her to live in her house during their occupation of the island. After the war, Rosie reported to those residents who returned that she had been treated courteously by the enemy.

Census records reveal that, from a postwar high of more than 500, the population of Portsmouth declined to 341 by 1870. Several government projects—among them a weather station in 1876 and a state-of-the-art life-saving station in 1897—helped to breathe temporary life into the village in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But when the new century dawned, the future for Portsmouth was bleak. Residents continued their exodus after several destructive storms pounded the island.

On August 2, 1927, Marian Gray Babb became the last child born on the island. Ten years later, the Coast Guard station was decommissioned. One by one, age-old institutions on the island fell like dominoes. In 1942, the village school closed, having held the distinction of being the smallest school in North Carolina, and perhaps the nation. Not long afterwards, the last store on the island closed.



Thereafter, supplies had to be ordered from the mainland. They were delivered to the village in a skiff poled by an island resident, who made his way to and from a rendezvous with the daily mailboat.

Perhaps the *coup de grâce* for Portsmouth was the weekend storm of 1944, which brought a tide higher than any in the memory of island residents.

A total of thirteen persons lived in the village in 1957, most of them elderly natives of the island.

After 119 years of continuous service, the post office closed on April 11, 1959.

For the next nine years, Hallis M. Bragg delivered the island's mail from the mainland to a skiff in the sound manned by Henry Pigott, a black man who had lived all his life on the island. When Pigott died in January 1971, the last two residents of the island, Elma Dixon and Marian Gray Babb, had no alternative but to move to the mainland. Portsmouth became a ghost town.

Meanwhile, the state was busy purchasing the island for inclusion in Cape Lookout National Seashore. As soon as the village was abandoned, the National Park Service announced that it would not allow any salvageable buildings to deteriorate.

Follow Haulover Road to the small, white post-office building, where it merges with the main village road, which runs the width of the island from the sound to the beach.

For many years, this structure was one of the focal points of the village. Not only did the tiny building serve as the post office, but it was also the last store in the village.

Of the six cemeteries known to still exist at Portsmouth, the most conspicuous is the Community Cemetery. Located about forty yards west of the post office, this serene, shaded spot is the island's largest cemetery, with some forty graves. Near the sound just northeast of this cemetery, a graveyard with thirteen graves is covered with undergrowth.

Just east of the post office lies the village crossroads, where the main village road intersects the north-south road. If you are familiar with old England, you will notice a striking similarity between the layout of Portsmouth village and villages in the English countryside. This Old World atmosphere is enhanced by scattered cottages, wooden footbridges over tidal creeks and marshes, and winding grass paths hedged by yaupon and myrtle.

In recognition of its historic significance, the 250-acre tract encompassing the village has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Some twenty-five major structures in various states of repair are located in this historic district. Except for the church and a home restored by the National Park Service as a visitor center, visitors are strictly forbidden to enter the buildings, as many are leased to private individuals. Nevertheless, hours and hours can be spent touring the fascinating village.

Charged with preserving the historic structures in and around the village, the superintendent of Cape Lookout National Seashore has been forced to look for private sources to aid in the effort. Budget constraints and a limited park staff have forced the National Park Service to institute several new programs to prevent the village from falling to ruin. Begun in the early 1990s, a volunteer caretakers' program has attracted individuals who are willing to live in the village for three months at a time to keep an eye on the structures and perform minor maintenance. In a similar vein, another program instituted by park officials allows citizens to lease some of the village dwellings for private use in exchange for restoration of the buildings.

At the crossroads, turn left and walk north to where the road ends at a marshy area called Doctor's Creek, on Ocracoke Inlet. Just north of the crossroads, the small cemetery of the Grace family contains four graves.

Near the end of the road stands the home of the last male resident of the village: Henry Pigott. This small story-and-a-half house is painted a distinctive pink color. Three small rooms are located on the

first floor, and the rooms upstairs are even smaller. Gutters drained rainwater into a big tank at the rear of the house. This water was then pumped inside for domestic use.

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*The Henry Pigott House*

Behind the house, you will notice a small, roofed, screened box on pilings. Such boxes were the only way of keeping food cool on the island. Fresh sea breezes blew through the box, which protected the food as it was being kept cool. Several of these ingenious contraptions can still be seen in the village.

Henry Pigott, his sister, Lizzie, and their uncle, Joe Abbott, comprised the only black family on the island for most of the twentieth century. Henry claimed his grandmother had been a slave on the island. He spoke with an English brogue. For many years, his sister cut hair for most of the villagers. In Henry's last years, when his health was declining, Junius Austin of Ocracoke provided care for the man who was Portsmouth's last link to the outside world. In 1971, upon Henry's death at the age of seventy-four in Albemarle General Hospital in Elizabeth City, the bell tolled for the village itself.

Even though it was held on a cold, windy, rainy day in January, Henry's funeral at the church in Portsmouth village was attended by throngs of friends and former residents. A bronze plaque was subsequently placed in the church in his honor.

Retrace your route to the crossroads near the post office. Turn left and walk south to the old school building. After this school closed, a young art professor from Huntington, West Virginia, purchased the building in the 1950s for use as a summer retreat and studio. While the artist was in residence, he cut hair for the remaining villagers.

If you are an intrepid hiker, follow the path south from the school for 1.5 miles to the portion of Portsmouth Island known as Sheep Island. Several abandoned houses are located on this extreme southern section of Portsmouth Island, but without question, the most historic spot is the Wallace Cemetery. Now overgrown with vegetation and difficult to locate, the cemetery holds the remains of the legendary John Wallace, governor of Shell Castle.

An integral part of the history of Portsmouth Island is the story of Shell Castle Island.

After the Revolutionary War, Shell Castle Island, made of rock and shells dumped into Pamlico Sound by ships using Ocracoke Inlet, became the site of one of coastal North Carolina's most imaginative enterprises. Located northwest of Portsmouth, the island was never longer than 0.5 miles. It was less than a football field in width. Originally called Old Rock, this diminutive island rivaled Portsmouth for a time in providing lightering facilities for oceangoing ships.

Shell Castle was the brainchild of two of the early entrepreneurs of the North Carolina coast: John Wallace of Portsmouth and John Gray Blount of Washington.

Wallace, a native of England, owned considerable land in the area and was an authority on the

navigational problems presented by Ocracoke Inlet.

In 1789, Blount, a member of the Council of State and the North Carolina Colonial Assembly, acquired a state grant of five small islands just inside the inlet, one of which was twenty-five-acre Shell Castle Island. In addition to his shrewd business talents, Blount was the surveyor who accompanied Daniel Boone to Kentucky and made entries of land there. At one point in his life Blount was among the nation's greatest landholders, his possessions large enough to cover an area about the size of Rhode Island. A fleet of ships owned by Blount and his brother traded with ports in the Northeast, the West Indies, and Europe.

Blount saw the operation at Shell Castle as the answer to his difficulties in moving cargo to and from small vessels plying the sounds and coastal rivers to his fleet of oceangoing vessels at Ocracoke Island. The day-to-day operation of the enterprise fell to John Wallace, who resided on the island and soon became the self-proclaimed "governor of Shell Castle."

Initially, the island facilities consisted of wharves, a warehouse, a gristmill, a windmill, and living quarters for island residents. By 1800, a tavern had been constructed, and the main building on the island stretched some three hundred feet. About the same time, Shell Castle was made an official port of entry, and its future seemed secure.

However, "Governor" Wallace died in 1810 without leaving an heir. Then the War of 1812 disrupted trade, and soon thereafter, the channel serving the island shoaled up. Thus, the island so valuable that a Spanish sea captain once offered to purchase it by covering it with Spanish doubloons was rendered useless and gradually deteriorated.

Shell Castle Island is still shown on nautical charts. No wider than 0.1 mile, it is nothing more than a high spot in the sound today. Although all evidence of the great Blount-Wallace enterprise vanished long ago into the waters of the sound, a picture in the Blount Collection at the State Archives in Raleigh bears a sketch of the facilities at Shell Castle.

Retrace your route to the crossroads, turn right, and walk east on the main village road. Doctor Creek is visible on the northern side of the road. Just east of the creek stands the island's most picturesque landmark. With its tiered steeple dominating the village skyline, the Methodist church is a favorite of photographers.

Inside this large, one-room building, sunlight streams through the arched windows. Old gaslights line the walls. In the chancel area, the old pedal organ remains. It was a gift from a former resident whose husband died at an early age in the employment of the lifesaving service. Visitors are free to tour the church, although the organ is off-limits.



*The Methodist church  
at Portsmouth village*

Constructed in 1899, this church was built after its predecessor was destroyed by a storm. Records as early as 1828 make mention of a Methodist church at Portsmouth. Ministers from Ocracoke regularly supplied the pulpit until shortly after World War II. Since that time, the church has been used irregularly.

Among the neatly kept houses surrounding the church are the Marian Gray Babb House and the Elma Dixon House. It was in these homes that the last two permanent residents of the village lived until 1971. Located behind the Babb and Dixon houses, the Dixon Cemetery contains the graves of Henry Pigott and his sister.

In June 1993, Marian Gray Babb, the last survivor among the permanent residents of Portsmouth, died in Beaufort. Now, no one remains alive who experienced life in the last days of the dying village.

Of the thirteen people who lived at Portsmouth when it celebrated its 204th birthday in 1957, most were in poor physical condition. No physician lived on the island, nor were there any health facilities. There was but a single telephone on the island, located in the abandoned Coast Guard station.

There were only two local residents who had any means of income. No stores were open in the village, so all food, clothing, and essentials had to be ordered from the mainland. This was accomplished by providing a list to the skipper of the mailboat, who filled the order and brought the requested items on the next run. No ice was available on the island, and rainwater collected in cisterns provided the only drinking water.

No television was available. Indeed, there was no source of electricity. Several residents had radios powered by batteries. Transportation around the village and down the island was primarily by foot. Not one motor vehicle was to be found on Portsmouth—not that it mattered, because the only roads were nothing more than crude cart paths rutted with potholes.

As you make your way east toward the beach on the main village road, the last structures you will encounter are the former Coast Guard station and its support buildings. After the station was closed, the large structure, with its characteristic watchtower, was used as a hunting lodge. Huge white doors cover the storage space from which surf boats were launched to rescue victims of shipwrecks.

Located nearby is a grass landing strip.

Approximately a hundred yards south of the Coast Guard station is the cistern of the old marine hospital.

Beyond the station, the beach lies about a mile away across a sand flat. The graves of two sea captains who died in the nineteenth century are located along the walk to the beach, but they are often covered by sand and sage grass.

On any given day, when visitors to Portsmouth Island leave the village by foot or by four-wheeled drive vehicle, they can travel down the beach for miles and miles without seeing a human being. No building mars the landscape of the sparsely vegetated, rolling sand flats. Except for the lonely cries of a shorebird and the thunder of the pounding surf and the winds that sometimes whisper and sometimes howl, nothing disturbs the silence.

On the map printed by the North Carolina Division of Transportation for public distribution, Portsmouth Island is shown as approximately 8 miles in length, with Swash Inlet as its southern boundary. This inlet reopened in 1939, but it is now shoaled up and is only awash at high tide. Accordingly, the 8-mile stretch of barrier beach extending south from Swash Inlet to Drum Inlet is considered by many geographers as part of Portsmouth Island.

You will notice a number of interesting geographical features if you take a trip down the island. Most evident is the almost complete lack of dunes on the ocean strand. Coupled with the extremely low elevation of the island, this scarcity of dunes has made Portsmouth highly susceptible to flooding.

during even moderate storms. Only two relatively tall dunes stand along the entire length. Big Hill, located 0.3 mile south of the village, is a cratered dune that was used by navigators as a landmark for many years. Generations of children from the village played on the dune, and it even provided a high spot of refuge during storms. Near the midsection of the island, George Hills, the tallest dunes, rise almost fourteen feet.

Probably no living person knows or cares more about Portsmouth Island than Don Morris of the village of Atlantic. Don was not born on Portsmouth, but rather on the mainland just across Core Sound from the southern end of the island. Portsmouth has always been a vital part of his life. His father was a commercial fisherman on Core Sound who began taking fishing parties to eighteen cabins he built on Portsmouth just north of the present Drum Inlet. When the state began its acquisition of the island in 1961, the senior Morris sold the 960 acres he owned on the island.

Since that time, the fishing cabins have been leased back to Don Morris. For many years, Don has operated his Kabin Kamp on the island as a concessionaire of the National Park Service. The cabins are clustered midway between Morris's sound-side ferry landing and the ocean. As spartan as these accommodations are, they represent the only lodgings on the island other than several nearby modular units. Camping is allowed on the island, but the lack of water and sheltered areas makes it feasible only for the hardest and most experienced of campers.

Because the sound-side waters off Portsmouth Island are so shallow, few boaters are able to navigate the treacherous approaches to the island. For many years, Don Morris has operated the only real means of access to the southern end of the island. His knowledge and experience in navigating the waters from Morris Marina at Atlantic to Portsmouth have allowed him to safely ferry thousands of vehicles and passengers to the island. Morris's current ferry is a forty-eight-foot vessel, the *Green Grass*, designed to carry four vehicles and forty-nine passengers.

Passengers on the *Green Grass* can readily understand why only the most experienced of mariners can navigate these waters. Small sand sharks swim around and under the boat, which at times scrapes the bottom of the narrow channel.

After providing ferry service to Portsmouth Island for more than forty years, Don Morris wants no other life. In his "Down East" dialect, he once expressed his feelings about his Portsmouth Island ferry operation: "I'm happiest when I'm on the ferry. I'm bringing happiness to people who are going over and the scenery is beautiful. I might make eight to ten trips a day, but never get tired of it."



*The Green Grass Ferry  
from Atlantic to Portsmouth Island*

If you are interested in riding the *Green Grass*, contact Don Morris in Atlantic, but be aware that this is an extremely difficult 16-mile trek from his ferry landing near the southern end of the island to the Portsmouth village. Most visitors to the island find that the ferry from Ocracoke, which lands at the northern end of Portsmouth, better suits their needs.

When you have had your fill of Portsmouth Island, return to the landing at Haulover Point and take the ferry back to Ocracoke. From there, you will need to retrieve your car and take the ferry trip from Ocracoke to Cedar Island. Upon landing at Cedar Island, drive 33 miles south on N.C. 12 to Harkers Island. (For information on the “Down East” country and the small communities lying between Cedar Island and Beaufort, see *The Down East Carteret Tour*, pages 36–53.)



*Cape Lookout National Seashore  
Visitor Center on Harkers Island*

Proceed to Calico Jack’s Marina, located on the eastern end of Harkers Island near the Cape Lookout National Seashore Visitor Center. A ferry operated by a National Park Service concessionaire departs from Calico Jack’s for the short trip across Back Sound and Barden Inlet to Cape Lookout, located at the southern end of Core Banks. Leave your car at the marina and take the ferry to Cape Lookout.

Three islands make up Cape Lookout National Seashore: Portsmouth, Core Banks, and Shackleford Banks. On the southern side of Drum Inlet, the 26-mile-long Core Banks stands out like a giant check mark or a spear with a broken point. Jutting far into the Atlantic at the southern end of the island, Cape Lookout, the central cape of the three famed North Carolina capes, lends its name to the state’s second, and younger, national seashore.

As you leave the Cape Lookout ferry, you may well be greeted by National Park Service rangers who offer a varied schedule of programs and activities, most of which take place at the former lighthouse keeper's quarters. It is here that the park visitor will find the only "amenities" in the national seashore south of Portsmouth. Restrooms, the only ones provided by the National Park Service on Core Banks, are located at the nearby lighthouse complex. Shelter from the storms that often blow up without much warning can also be found at the complex.

Other than the buildings at Portsmouth village, there are few reminders of human habitation on the three islands of Cape Lookout National Seashore. By far the most imposing of the man-made structures is the Cape Lookout Lighthouse.

While visitors were still climbing the steps to the top of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse for a spectacular view of the Atlantic in 1979, the Cape Lookout Lighthouse had already received a death sentence from the National Park Service. Fortunately, the sea has commuted the premature sentence for this, the prototype for the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse and the other lighthouses built on the Outer Banks.



*Cape Lookout Lighthouse*

A lighthouse has stood at Cape Lookout since 1812, when the predecessor to the existing tower was erected. The original ninety-six-foot structure was painted with horizontal red and white stripes. However, mariners complained for many years that the lighthouse was not tall enough. After some unsuccessful efforts to improve the effectiveness of the structure, the federal government decided to erect a replacement.

Construction on the present lighthouse commenced in 1857. Two years later, the imposing red-brick structure stood 156 feet above the Atlantic. It was not only blessed with a majestic appearance, but it was also more functional than its predecessor, no doubt the reason that it was used as the mold for the new lights at Cape Hatteras, Bodie Island, and Currituck Beach.



*Remnants of original  
Cape Lookout Lighthouse*

Constructed close to the first lighthouse, the new tower featured walls that were nine feet thick at their base. Federal architects knew full well that the structure had to be strong enough to withstand the terrible hurricanes and coastal storms that pounded the cape. But the builders did not envision the structural tests to which their architectural masterpiece would be exposed within a few years of its completion.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, Confederate forces destroyed the lens of the lighthouse in their effort to hamper the Federal blockade off the North Carolina coast. By 1863, the tower was relit, and the Confederacy looked for an opportunity to darken it again. That chance came in the early spring of 1864 through the help of twenty-two-year-old Mary Frances Chadwick of nearby Beaufort, who by that time was already a veteran spy for the Confederate army.

From the intelligence provided by Chadwick, a Confederate raiding party made an undetected landing at Cape Lookout in early April 1864. They immediately proceeded about their task of packing the new lighthouse with explosives. Because the original wooden tower was still standing, it was also rigged to be blown up. When the explosives were detonated, the cape shook. Fire destroyed the old structure, and the new lighthouse sustained extensive damage. Not only was its lamp destroyed, but a large crack ran the length of the brick tower.

It was 1867 before the lighthouse once again sent its beam to mariners in the Atlantic.

Six years later, the United States Lighthouse Board expressed concern that seafarers along the North Carolina coast might be confused by the redbrick lighthouses of similar construction along the Outer Banks. To remedy this dangerous situation, the board issued a directive on April 17, 1873, to make the four lighthouses “more readily distinguishable in the daytime.” Cape Lookout would be painted in a checkered design, with black and white diamonds; the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse would be given its now-famous black and white spiral bands; and the Bodie Island Lighthouse would be distinguished by its black and white horizontal stripes. At the time, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse was still on the drawing board, and the decision was made to leave it unpainted when completed.



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