North Carolina Lighthouses

Image: 6 North Carolina Lighthouses
North Carolina Beaches

North Carolina beaches extend a little over 300 miles. The Outer Banks are barrier islands running from the Virginia border to the South Carolina border. The Outer Banks separate the Atlantic Ocean from large inland bodies of water, called “sounds”.

North Carolina Beaches are mostly flat and low; the sands continuously shift with tides and storms. Boats need assistance to navigate safely through these dangerous shoals, inlets, sounds and rivers. Located at dangerous places, lighthouses are towers with a bright light on top were built to serve as a navigational aid and to warn boats of dangerous areas.

Most lighthouses rhythmically flash or eclipse their lights to provide an identification signal unique to each lighthouse. The particular pattern of flashes or eclipses is known as the character of the light, and the interval at which it repeats is called the period.
Bald Head Island Lighthouse

Called “Old Baldy”, the Bald head Island Lighthouse is the oldest standing lighthouse. Built in 1817, Old Baldy replaced the original lighthouse which was built in 1797. Old Baldy is 110 feet tall and is squat and octagonal in shape. It was built to mark the Cape Fear Entrance.

Old Baldy is no longer active and does not have a light.
Bodie Island Lighthouse

The Bodie Island Lighthouse was originally built in 1847; this lighthouse began leaning towards the ocean.

In 1859, a new lighthouse was constructed; however, in 1861, Confederate forces blew up the 90’ lighthouse tower.

Replaced in 1872, the Bodie Island Lighthouse had a 156 foot tower whose beacon can be seen for 19 miles out into the open Atlantic. Attracted to the light, geese began crashing into the tower and damaging the lens. To correct this problem, the lighthouse tower was painted black and white (bands or broad horizontal stripes).

Image 3: Bodie Island Lighthouse a tall brick lighthouse painted with black and white horizontal bands.
Cape Hatteras Lighthouse

Originally built in 1803, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was built because of dangerous offshore conditions. Unusual offshore currents flowed in opposite directions producing conditions which caused fog, dangerous storms and rough currents. These rough currents led sailors to think that they were in deep water, causing numerous ship wrecks. The light from the original 90 foot tower was not bright enough, causing many ships to run ashore.

In 1853 the lighthouse tower was extended to 150 feet and Fesnel Lens were installed which created a more intense light. Constant sand erosion due to a number of storms damaged this lighthouse.

In 1870, a new lighthouse was built with a record 200 foot tower - the world’s tallest brick lighthouse. Built 1/3 of a mile from the sea, the Atlantic Ocean advanced to within a 150 feet of the lighthouse in 1930. Due to erosion damage, the lighthouse was inactive from 1936-1950.

In 1999, the entire lighthouse was lifted and moved. The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse is painted a black and white candy stripe (spiral pattern).
Cape Lookout Lighthouse

The original 93 foot lighthouse was built in 1812 to warn ships about the dangerous shoals. The light did not reach past the shoals and ships continued to run aground.

A new 156 foot lighthouse was built in 1859. This lighthouse was constructed with 8 foot thick double brick walls. During the Civil War, lighthouses lights were disassembled so that these lights could not be used by Northern forces. In 1864, the original 93 foot lighthouse was blown up by confederate soldiers and caused damaged to the new lighthouse.

In 1873 the lighthouse was painted a black-and-white checkered pattern. The diamond pattern has a purpose - when sailors see the white diamonds, they know they are sailing east or west. When the black diamonds are fully visible, the sailors know they are sailing north or south.

The Cape Lookout Lighthouse has 207 spiral steps which is equivalent to climbing a twelve story building.
Currituck Beach Lighthouse

The 162 foot Currituck Beach Lighthouse was built in 1875 and is a rarity along the Atlantic shore as its bricks have never been painted. The red bricks were used to distinguish this lighthouse from other lighthouses. It took 1 million bricks to build this lighthouse. The base of this lighthouse was 6 feet thick to withstand hurricane forces. This lighthouse was built to alert sailors about the dangerous shoals.
Oak Island Lighthouse

The original Oak Island Lighthouse was built in 1849. The existing lighthouse was completed in 1958 and is the newest lighthouse in North Carolina. Built with reinforced concrete, this lighthouse is 169 feet with an 11 foot aluminum lantern housing. The lighthouse is skinny and the steps are almost vertical, like a ladder. The Oak Island Lighthouse is the only North Carolina lighthouse built by the US Coast Guard. This lighthouse helps guide the monstrous container ships through the Cape Fear Shoals to the port of Wilmington.
Ocracoke Lighthouse

The 75 foot Ocracoke Lighthouse was built in 1823 after the Shell Castle Island Lighthouse was destroyed by lightening in 1818. The Shell Castle Lighthouse location was not used again due to shifting sands which moved the main channel more than a mile. Ocracoke Lighthouse is the longest operating North Carolina lighthouse. Old Baldy is five years older, but is no longer an active lighthouse being used for navigation purposes. The Ocracoke Lighthouse is painted white.