



Tidewater

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THE MAGAZINE FOR AAA MEMBERS

TRAVELER

Brilliant Beacons

The mid-Atlantic's
historic lighthouses
guide you to insights
and adventure

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Coast Guards

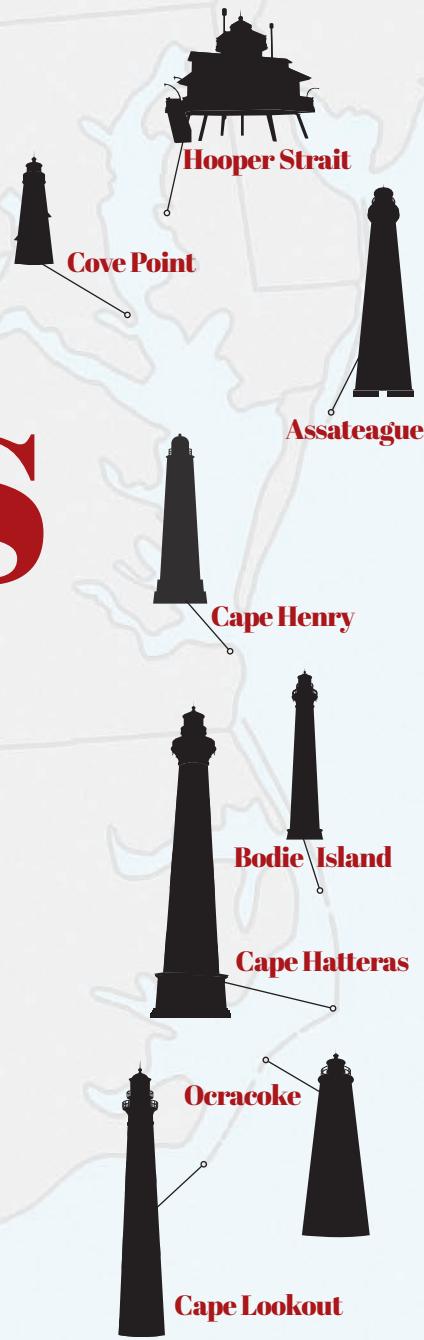
The Mid-Atlantic's historic lighthouses illuminate our heritage

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN AND CELE SELDON

They stand as silent sentinels, homages to the age of steam and sail. Before satellite or GPS, they guided mariners safely ashore.

“Lighthouses are more than bricks, stones, and metal,” says Jessica Kinder, site coordinator for Virginia’s Cape Henry Lighthouse. “They are symbols of protection. They are always searching in the distance. They are a beacon to mariners out to sea and shine in a period of darkness or guide the way through fog and storms.”

These soaring structures are real and romantic icons of the American coastline. Along the Mid-Atlantic shore from Maryland to South Carolina, towers built over the centuries illuminate our history and culture. Journey with us to some of the region’s most beautiful and significant lighthouses.





VIRGINIA

Assateague Lighthouse

8231 Beach Road, Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, on the Virginia portion of Assateague Island. (757) 336-6122; fws.gov/refuge/chincoteague

The first light in this red-and-white striped landmark was a single oil lamp with four wicks and a powerful first-order Fresnel lens (see "Leading Light" on page 27). In 1933, the lighthouse converted to electricity. Today's twin rotating lights can be seen 19 miles at sea. Climb the lighthouse on weekends from April through November.

Built: 1867
Height: 142 feet
Adult admission: Seven-day vehicle pass for the refuge: \$20; no fee to climb the lighthouse

"In order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present." —Francis Bacon

TOP: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

VIRGINIA

Cape Henry Lighthouse

583 Atlantic Avenue, Fort Story
 (757) 422-9421; preservationvirginia.org

Built near the location of the 1607 first landing by Jamestown settlers, the tan brick structure was the first federal works project authorized by the United States government and is one of only nine federal octagonal lighthouses left in America. You can climb the 191 steps to the top for panoramic views of the Chesapeake Bay as well as of the newer, still-active 1881 black-and-white cast iron Cape Henry Lighthouse (inset, not open to visitors). The lighthouses are on an active military base, and visitors must clear security before proceeding to the public parking lot.



Built: 1792
Height: 90 feet
Adult admission: \$8



SOUTH CAROLINA

Hunting Island Lighthouse

2555 Sea Island Parkway, Hunting Island
 (843) 838-2011; southcarolinaparks.com/hunting-island

The Confederate Army destroyed an 1859 lighthouse here during the Civil War to keep the Union Army from using it. Today, this beacon in Hunting Island State Park is South Carolina's only publicly accessible lighthouse. The 167-step spiral staircase yields stunning views of the barrier island and surrounding marshes from the observation deck. With a few exceptions, the lighthouse is available daily for climbing, although climbers need to be at least 44 inches tall.

Built: 1875
Height: 136 feet
Adult admission: \$2 for the lighthouse, in addition to the state park admission fee of \$5



Built: 1823
Height: 75 feet



NORTH CAROLINA

Ocracoke Lighthouse

Lighthouse Road, Ocracoke, Cape Hatteras National Seashore. (252) 473-2111; nps.gov/caha

Set in the heart of Ocracoke Island, Ocracoke is the second-oldest lighthouse in North Carolina (Old Baldy on Bald Head Island is the oldest) and the only white lighthouse on the Outer Banks. A whitewash coating of lime, salt, ground rice, whiting, and clear glue mixed with boiling water provided the original lighthouse's coloration. Although the brick tower is not open for climbing, visitors can enjoy the beautiful grounds and picture-perfect photo opportunities. Parking can get crowded in summer, but the lighthouse is a short walk or bike ride from virtually anywhere in the quaint village of Ocracoke.

Built: 1870
Height: 198 feet
Adult admission: \$8

NORTH CAROLINA

Cape Hatteras Lighthouse

46379 Lighthouse Road, Buxton, Cape Hatteras National Seashore
(252) 473-2111; nps.gov/caha

Cape Hatteras is the tallest brick lighthouse in the United States, with some 1.25 million bricks used for its construction. Over the years, storms and tidal action eroded the shoreline to such an extent that officials feared for the tower's survival. So, over 23 days in 1999, the National Park Service moved the lighthouse and its principal keeper's quarters inland almost 3,000 feet.

You can climb the 257 iron steps from the third Friday in April through Columbus Day in October (limit 30 visitors per climb).

NORTH CAROLINA

Cape Lookout Lighthouse

131 Charles Street, Harkers Island
(National Park Service visitors center)
Cape Lookout National Seashore
(252) 728-2250; nps.gov/caloc

This lighthouse is accessible only by boat (including regular authorized ferries from Harkers Island and Beaufort, plus other tour options). The tower has a black-and-white diamond pattern—the only lighthouse in the United States to bear this unique daymark. It features a bright light that flashes every 15 seconds and typically can be seen from more than 10 miles out to sea. From the third week in May to the third weekend in September, you can climb the 207 steps to the top for views of the Core Banks.

Built: 1859
Height: 163 feet
Adult admission: \$8



“Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.” — Anne Lamott

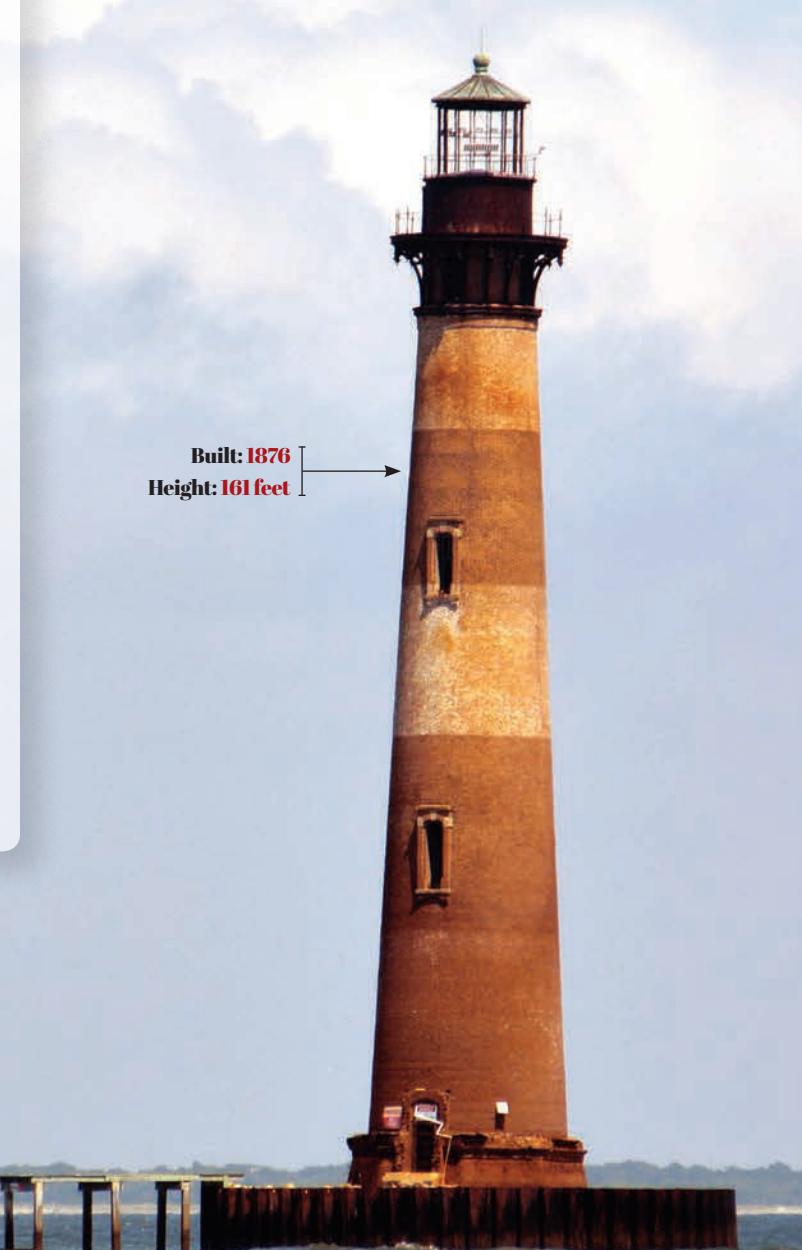
SOUTH CAROLINA

Morris Island Lighthouse

Viewable from the beach at the eastern end of Folly Beach and on select Charleston Harbor boat tours. (843) 633-0099; savethelight.org

Today's tower is the third incarnation of this lighthouse at the southern end of Charleston Harbor. The original 42-foot 1767 structure was replaced in 1838 with a 102-foot version that was destroyed in the Civil War. Rebuilt in 1876 of red brick, it was covered in black and white stripes; the black paint wore off more quickly, so it now appears red-and-white-striped. Although this lighthouse is not open to the public, you can head to the eastern end of Folly Beach, where a quarter-mile trail leads to a quiet beach that yields views of the lighthouse out in the water. Several narrated boat tours also pass nearby.

Built: 1876
Height: 161 feet



"I can think of no other edifice constructed by man as altruistic as a lighthouse. They were built only to serve." —George Bernard Shaw

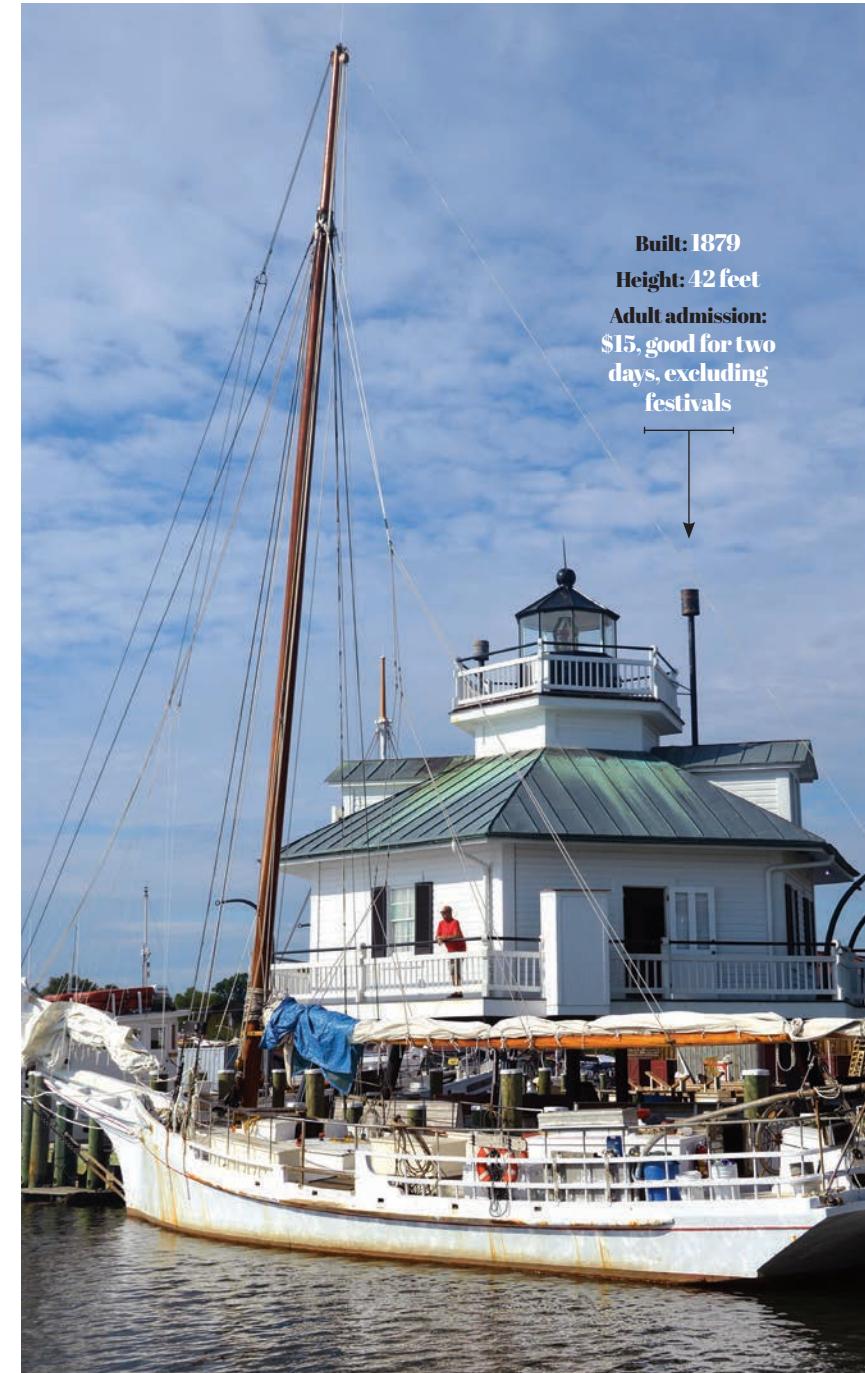
MARYLAND

Hooper Strait Lighthouse

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, 213 N. Talbot Street, St. Michaels. (410) 745-2916; cbmm.org

This squat, hexagonal wooden structure originally marked the entrance to Tangier Sound in Hooper Strait, its stilts screwed into the sea bottom. In 1966, the screw-pile lighthouse was moved to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Here, you can climb the hatch up to the lens and learn about what it was like to be lighthouse keeper.

Built: 1879
Height: 42 feet
Adult admission: \$15, good for two days, excluding festivals



MARYLAND

Cove Point Lighthouse

3500 Lighthouse Boulevard, Lusby (get directions at the Calvert Marine Museum, 14150 Solomons Island Road, Solomons). (410) 326-2042; calvertmarinemuseum.com

This bright-white brick cone is Maryland's oldest continuously operating lighthouse. Thirteen whale oil lamps originally provided the light. The current iron lantern contains a six-panel Fresnel lens that rotates once every minute, producing a flashing white light every 10 seconds. The restored lighthouse keeper's cottage is now a rental duplex welcoming up to eight guests per side (rates start at \$550 for a three-night stay or \$1,050 for the whole house). The Calvert Marine Museum 10 miles to the south, at the Patuxent River mouth, has excellent exhibits and the 1883 screw-pile Drum Point Lighthouse (moved to the museum in 1975).

Built: 1828
Height: 45 feet
Adult admission: \$9



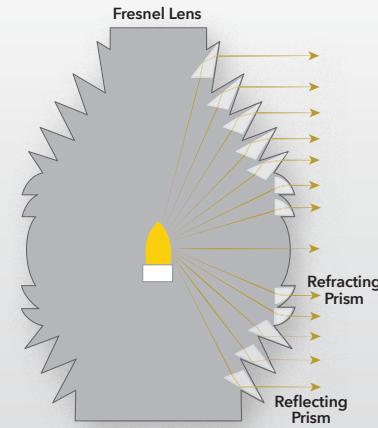
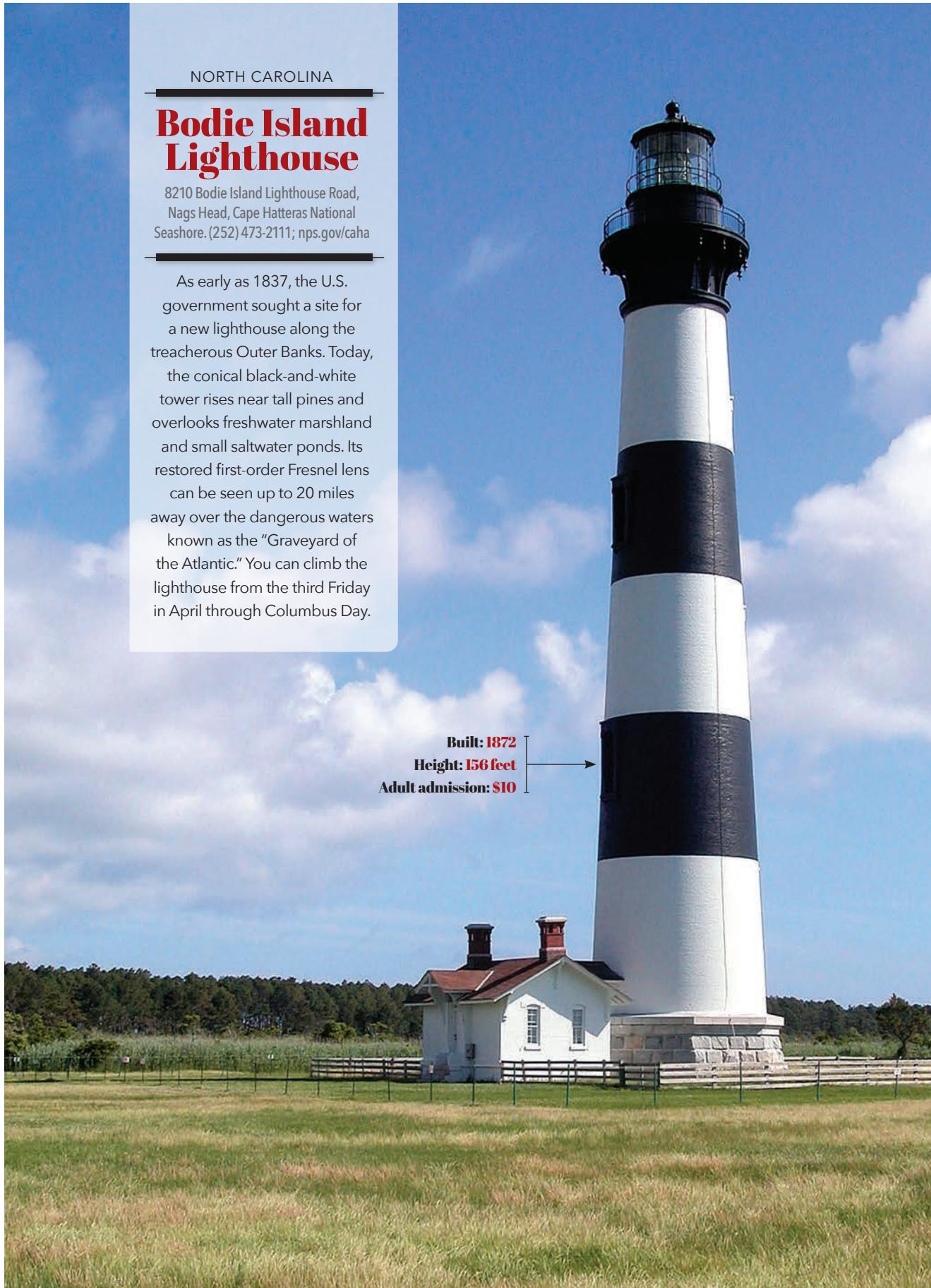
NORTH CAROLINA

Bodie Island Lighthouse

8210 Bodie Island Lighthouse Road, Nags Head, Cape Hatteras National Seashore. (252) 473-2111; nps.gov/caha

As early as 1837, the U.S. government sought a site for a new lighthouse along the treacherous Outer Banks. Today, the conical black-and-white tower rises near tall pines and overlooks freshwater marshland and small saltwater ponds. Its restored first-order Fresnel lens can be seen up to 20 miles away over the dangerous waters known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic." You can climb the lighthouse from the third Friday in April through Columbus Day.

Built: 1872
Height: 156 feet
Adult admission: \$10



Leading Light

Tasked by the French government to improve the nation's lighthouses, French physicist Augustin-Jean Fresnel developed the Fresnel lens in 1824. In a Fresnel lens, a series of concentric grooves replaces conventional curved surfaces, creating individual refracting surfaces. These lenses can be thinner than other lenses while capturing more light. Lighthouses adopted them because the light can be seen from a greater distance than conventional lenses. A first-order lens is the biggest.



Night and Day

Builders painted lighthouses in different patterns so that mariners could identify the structures in daylight. Sailors could tell them apart by their distinct designs and colors—vertical stripes, horizontal stripes, diagonal markings, or other patterns. The patterns also make it easy to see the lighthouses against their backgrounds. At night, when lighthouse towers can't be seen, their rotating lights feature distinct flashing patterns unlike those of any nearby lighthouses.

Virginia natives Lynn and Cele Seldon have lived near the Atlantic Ocean most of their lives. Their most recent book is 100 Things to Do in Charleston Before You Die.