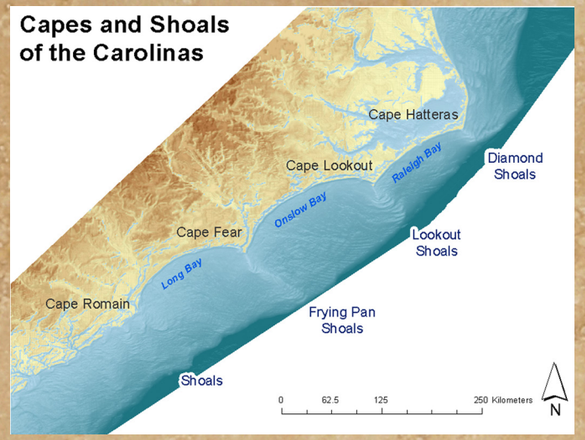


Credit: USGS Woods Hole Coastal and Marine Science Center

Before the Lights

"Cape Romain is very low land; it has neither tree nor bush; and appears when seen at a distance, to be a sand left dry by the tide."

-Description in the Atlantic Coast Pilot, 1867

For decades, the Atlantic Coast Pilot was "the navigator's bible for sailing in American waters." When early sailors came down the coast to the port at Charleston, they encountered shoals that lie just under the water level nine miles southeast from the Cape Romain islands. This area of coastland has been a dynamic landscape since the Spanish colonial period, and has been alternately called "Cape Romain," "Cape Cateret," and "the Raccoon Keys" over its long history. The shoals are built up from sediment deposited off the mouth of the Santee River.

Before the construction of the lighthouses, many ships, on their way from New England or Europe to the port at Charleston, were wrecked on those shoals. Pilot boats and local plantation residents often attempted to help surviving crew members and salvage cargo.

One shipwreck on Cape Romain happened during the War of 1812. As reported in the Carolina Gazette, the schooner Inca, captained by Alexander P. Craig, was carrying wine, brandy, silks, verdigris, and cream of tartar to Charleston from La Teste, France. Seeing a man of war brig to leeward, it sailed closer to the Cape Romain shoals to escape, but saw another man of war brig coming in from windward. After grounding on shore, "the brigs came to anchor within half gun shot, and kept up a continual fire." After two hours, the crew tried to escape to shore, and though British Marines captured many, some made it to Charleston to tell their story.

Since their construction, the Lights have served multiple roles for travelers on the sea and for area residents, both directing sailors away from the Cape Romain shoals and then continuing to be historic landmarks of the South Carolina coastline.

The Lights as Navigation

The shoals at Cape Romain had been a treacherous obstacle to successful travel and the trade of rice, corn, flour, rum, and slaves along the South Carolina coast for years. In 1823,the Lighthouse Board of the Treasury Department authorized funds for Winslow Lewis to construct a lighthouse at Cape Romain. In the spring and summer of 1827, the City Gazette reported on the construction of a lighthouse "on the N.E. Raccoon Key, near Cape Romain." The lighthouse was a truncated conical brick structure, 65 feet above high water, originally painted in black and white stripes, with a stationary light directed at the shoals themselves. Nonetheless, shipwrecks continued to be reported in Charleston newspapers through the 1830s.

Completed in 1857, and first lit early in 1858, another lighthouse replaced the first when it proved to be ineffective. The octagonal brick structure rose to 154 feet, though it tilted several degrees out of plumb. After its construction, reports of shipwrecks substantially decreased.

Credit: Tarbox Family Photograph Collection, Georgetown County Digital Library: Cape Romain Lighthouse

During the Civil War the light was abandoned, though both Union ships patrolling the blockade and Southerners trying to run the blockade used them as landmarks. During World War II, although ships had begun navigating with radar technology, the U.S. Coast Guard made use of the lighthouse and keeper's house as an observation post. Except for those two periods, the 1857 light served mariners until decommissioned in 1947.

Fresnel lens

The Lights as Technology

The 1827 lighthouse had a stationary red light powered by a whale oil wick lamp, that sailors could see from a distance of 14 miles. It had a light of eleven lamps and 21-inch reflectors, that proved inadequate to successfully anticipating the danger of the shoals.

The 1857 lighthouse had an oil lamp as well, but also a new type of prismatic lens that focused the amount of light that went out to sea. It had been originally invented in the 1820s by Augustin-Jean Fresnel in France. One of the earliest Fresnel systems installed in the U.S., sailors could see the Cape Romain light, which made one revolution each minute, from a distance of approximately 19 miles.

In the 1930s, it was replaced by an electrical system which used large batteries to power the light, so that the lighthouses needed attention only once every three months for replacing the batteries and maintaining and cleaning the lens.

The Lights as Job and Home

From 1827 until the 1930s, keepers and assistants lived on the island with their families in order to have daily access to the lighthouses. Keepers maintained a rigorous daily routine of cleaning and painting structures, polishing lenses and lamps, and carrying oil, tools, and other supplies up the 212 stairs to the top of the lighthouse. The families planted gardens and ornamental plants and trees, some of which grow to this day. The location of the lighthouses on the distant island meant that purchasing supplies, going to school, or hosting visitors required boat rides to and from the mainland.

McClellanville residents, credit: Henry Wichmann

Many keepers requested transfers because of the difficulties of living in such isolation. The weather had a tremendous impact on their ability to travel and on all aspects of their everyday lives. In 1933, the use of a battery powered light source did away with the need for a resident lighthouse keeper.

The Lights as Landmark

During the early 1900s, Lighthouse Island also came to be a destination for area residents, especially those from McClellanville, for picnics and other social events.

As an excellent location for fishing, crabbing, oystering, and recreational sailing, local mariners have through history and continue to make frequent use of the lighthouses as fixtures on the flat horizon to navigate around the islands and hammocks in the area.

The Spray takes villagers to the Cape, credit: The Village Museum

Keeper's residence, credit: Tommy Graham

The Lights as Historic Site

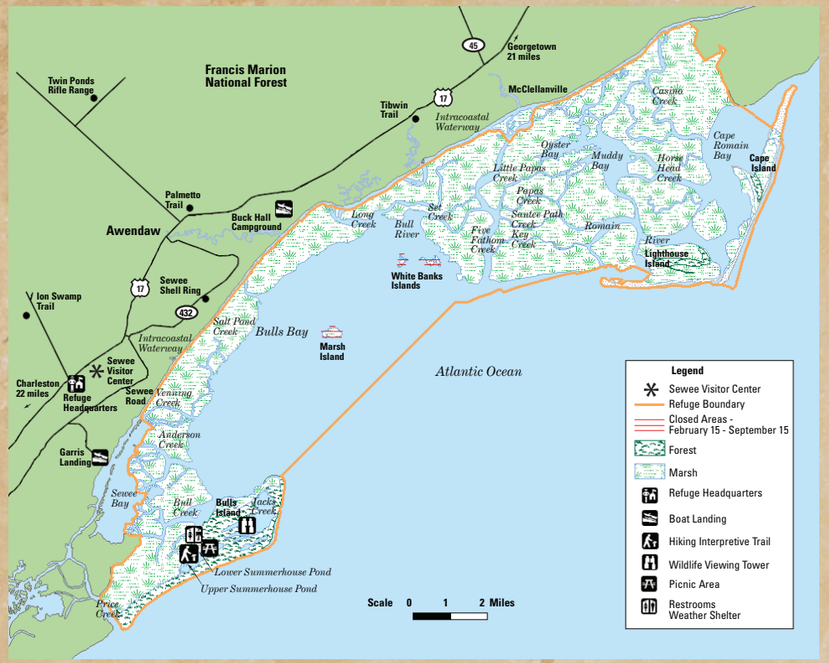
The lighthouses at Cape Romain were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 through the initiative of regional government. The 1827 lighthouse is the second oldest in South Carolina, and the oldest in Charleston County. Both lighthouses survived, although in disrepair, but the keeper's house and other support buildings were dismantled and removed in 1964.

The lighthouses complete the larger Cape Romain historical and cultural landscape of commerce, tragedy, navigation, work, and recreation.

Cape Romain Today

As part of a Class I Wilderness Area and the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, the island now named for its historic structures, Lighthouse Island, still hosts many native plant species, as well as nesting grounds for many species of shorebirds and for Loggerhead sea turtles. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is committed to the preservation of the natural environment and processes, and the Cape Romain Lighthouses can help us understand still more about the interactions of people with that environment throughout history.

Credit: Charleston County, Robert Mill's Atlas, 1825



http://www.fws.gov/caperomain/imagesCRomainMap.pdf

Preserve the Legacy of Cape Romain's Sea Island Lights

You can help! Refuge staff, partners and volunteers work to maintain and restore the historic lighthouses on Lighthouse Island. If you would like to help with the lighthouse restoration efforts please contact:

Friends of Coastal South Carolina
P.O. Box 1131
Mt. Pleasant, SC 29465
info@SCCoastalFriends.org

or

Village Museum
401 Pinckney Street
McClellanville, SC 29458-9723
843/887 3030
villagemuseum@tds.net

Cape Romain
National Wildlife Refuge
5801 Hwy 17 North
Awendaw SC, 29429
843/928 3264
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/cape_romain

August 2017

The Lights

A Brief History of the Cape Romain Lighthouses

photo: Steve Hillebrand