The Lights as Historic Site

The lighthouses at Cape Romain were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990 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.

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:

SEWEE Association
PO Box 1131
Mt Pleasant, SC 29465
seeweassociation@earthlink.net
OR
Village Museum
401 Pinckney Street
McClellanville, SC 29458-9723
843/887-3030
villagemuseum@tpt.net

Credit: Charleston County, Robert Mills' Atlas, 1815


U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
The Lights
A Brief History of the Cape Romain Lighthouses

photo: Steve Milbrodt
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 coast.

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 1826, the Lighthouse Board of the Treasury Department authorized funds for Winlow Lewis to construct a lighthouse at Cape Romain. In the spring and summer of 1837, the City Gazette reported on the construction of a lighthouse "on the N.E. Racoon Key, near Cape Romain." The lighthouse was a truncated conical brick structure, 60 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 throughout the 1800s.

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.

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.

The Lights as Technology
The 1857 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 1890s, 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 1857 until the 1900s, 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.

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 1888, 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 McCollawee, for picnics and other social events. As an excellent location for fishing, crabbing, oysterling, 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.