

Cape Lookout National Seashore

CALO AS-1564

Audio Tour Portsmouth Village

Final Narration Script

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Track 10: Introduction (3:32)

Narrator:

Welcome to Cape Lookout National Seashore and Portsmouth Village.

The history of Portsmouth Village stretches back more than 250 years. Founded during the colonial era, it was born out of the political friction between England and its rival, Spain. For generations of Villagers, however, the ebb and flow of global politics was largely a backdrop. It was their daily relationship with these waters — their struggle to survive and thrive — that focused and anchored their close-knit community and distinctive way of life.

Right from the beginning, Portsmouth served a practical purpose. During the 1740s, Spanish pirates and privateers routinely used inlets along North Carolina's coast as staging grounds to attack English merchant ships. To help defend shipping revenues and coastal settlements, the North Carolina colonial Assembly approved an act, in 1753, which created the village of Portsmouth, including a fort to keep the pirates at bay.

The piracy faded in time, and Portsmouth quickly grew to become one of the largest Outer Bank settlements. For nearly a century, it would serve as a major lightering port, a role you'll learn about during your tour today. With the outbreak of the Civil War, however,

Portsmouth's good fortune went into rapid decline, and today you'll find little evidence of the village's early years.

As you'll see, the National Park Service has restored the remaining buildings to the way they looked between the early 1900s and the 1960s. Each structure is a stubborn survivor in what has always been a tenuous landscape, threatened by the storms and shifting fortunes that ultimately led to Portsmouth Village's complete abandonment in 1971.

Today, Portsmouth is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its residents are gone. Nevertheless, Portsmouth is still evocative of a vanished era thanks to the artifacts that remain, and the stories of the people who made this place their home.

Track 15—Stop 1 to Stop 2

This audio tour has no set sequence. You can visit the tour stops in any order. Simply refer to your village map to locate the points of interest covered by the tour. If you're at the Dock, you can begin the remainder of your tour at Track 20. If you're at the Life-Saving Station, start with Track 100.

The entire tour should take about 60 minutes. For your safety, as you tour the historic Village, please be aware of your footing as trails and buildings floors may be uneven. Mosquitoes can be pesky, so please cover up or use repellent. There are marsh creeks and bridges without handrails, so please keep track of young children.

Enjoy the rest of your tour.

Track 20: The Dock and Ocracoke Inlet (2:48)

Narrator:

This panoramic view of Ocracoke Inlet — with the Atlantic Ocean on the right and Pamlico Sound to the left — would have been familiar to Portsmouth residents of 200 years ago, as well as to the ship captains, crewmembers, and traders who knew these waters so well. It's quiet now, but imagine this place as a bustling port— one that owed its existence to Ocracoke Inlet, a vital access route to Pamlico Sound and the ports beyond, such as New Bern, Washington, and Elizabeth City. The Sound was far too shallow for large ships. That's why cargo was transferred in the inlet from larger ships to boats with shallow drafts. This practice, known as "lightering," was the bedrock of Portsmouth's prosperity.

The warehouses and docks that served the lightering business once occupied Shell Castle Island in the inlet. Merchants brought in raw sugar from the West Indies and manufactured goods from Europe such as ceramics and textiles. Mainland businesses shipped out lumber and shipbuilding supplies such as tar, pitch, and turpentine. The skilled marine pilots who were based here guided ships through the treacherous channels.

As the lightering industry expanded, so did Portsmouth. In 1842, over 1400 vessels and two-thirds of North Carolina's exports passed through Ocracoke Inlet. Until the end of the Civil War, slaves performed most lightering labor. On any given day during the peak years, you could have found over one hundred slaves working on and around the docks.

Unfortunately, the shoals or shallow areas in Ocracoke Inlet were continuously shifting. By the 1840s, larger ships had a hard time making it through. In some cases, cargo had to be transferred from big ships anchored off the coast to smaller vessels, and then lightered again to even smaller vessels in the inlet. Then, in 1846, a hurricane opened a new, more navigable inlet at Hatteras. Shipping routes began to shift north. As newly built railroads on the mainland began competing with the shipping trade, and with the completion of the Dismal Swamp Canal to the Chesapeake, Portsmouth's prominence as a lightering station slid into decline.

Track 25—Stop 2 to Stop 3.

After you've soaked up a bit more of the peace and quiet of this special spot, take a walk down the road along the salt marsh and listen to Track 30 as you walk.

Track 30: Marsh and Portsmouth Beginnings

Narrator:

Soon after Portsmouth Village was chartered in 1753, surveyors laid out fifty acres' worth of half-acre lots — with what they called “convenient streets” — at the north end of Core Banks. Many people involved in the shipping trades lived here with their families.

During the next hundred years, Portsmouth expanded from a settlement into a thriving community. In 1806, the Federal government established a Customs House. In 1827, a marine hospital opened its doors. And in 1840, the village received its own post office. At the height of its growth in 1860, Portsmouth boasted 109 buildings and was home to more than 540 residents.

The Civil War brought this growth to an abrupt halt as Union troops closed in along the Outer Banks. Many white residents fled and probably took their slaves with them. The arriving Union forces took control of Portsmouth early and blockaded the inlet for the rest of the war.

A few years after the war ended, the 1870 census listed only a few black residents as remaining in the village— a fisherman named Parker Willis —and the family of a black woman named Rose Ireland. In time, Rose's family became the only remaining black residents, using surnames that included Ireland, Abbot, Pickett, and Pigott. With the lightering business all but gone, they and most of the remaining white residents turned to fishing and hunting as their main occupation.

During the decades that followed, a fish oil-processing factory and a cannery opened but ultimately failed. Well into the early 20th century, most village men continued to work as independent fishermen, netting a variety of fish and harvesting oysters and clams. Many local families bartered their fish for other goods. Due to the high cost of bringing food from the mainland, more than a few ate seafood for all three meals each day.

Track 35—Stop 3 to Stop 4

If you follow your map and continue along the tour route, you'll come to the next tour stop — the Theodore and Annie Salter House — where you'll find exhibits as well as rest rooms.

Track 40: Theodore and Annie Salter House / Visitor Center (1:24)

Narrator:

During the late 1800s, Village native Joseph Dixon built this house for his family. It originally stood about a mile down the island — in an area known as Middle Community — where Joseph's sister and brother-in-law, Annie and Theodore Salter, also lived nearby.

Years later, Annie became the Village postmaster. At least twice each day, in good weather and bad, she would walk the mile between her home and Salter's combined store and Post Office. To make Annie's life easier and reduce her commute, her husband Theodore finally bought this house from the Dixons and moved it to this spot near the

store. Shifting the house was no easy task. Rollers were carefully placed underneath it, and then a capstan and mule were used to winch the house along, inch by inch, foot by foot. It took two weeks to complete the move.

Track 45—Stop 4 to Stop 5 or 6

Now step through the doorway and take a look at the special exhibits inside. While you're exploring, listen to the oral history segments we've included in this tour, featuring the voices of Portsmouth residents. When you're finished, you can either head over to the Pigott House across the road or follow the road to the right to Annie's combined Post Office and General Store.

[The following Oral History selectable topics appear here on the playlist]

- **Track 46:** Community/Life in the Village
Speakers: Lionel Gilgo, Levin Fulcher, Emma Gilgo
- **Track 47:** Sustenance
Speakers: Steve Roberts, Ira Babb
- **Track 48:** Mosquitoes
Speaker: Levin Fulcher
- **Track 49:** Childhood Days
Speakers: Steve Roberts, Lionel Gilgo

Track 50: Pigott House (2:26)

Narrator:

Harmon Austin, a carpenter from Ocracoke, built this house in 1902. It was once the home of Henry Pigott, a direct descendant of slaves and grandson of Rose Ireland. Like many people in Portsmouth Village, Rose had gotten by simply by doing a little bit of everything.

She had served the community as a midwife, a doctor, and a nurse. She had fished, oystered, and worked in the gristmill. She had also given birth to a daughter named Leah, whose seven children included Henry and his sister Lizzie.

Like their grandmother and most of their neighbors, Henry and Lizzie fished and oystered as well. Henry was also responsible for going out to the mail boat to retrieve mail and passengers. By this time, Portsmouth's tiny population could no longer support a store, so he would give the Captain a list of items needed from Ocracoke — goods the Captain would bring back on his next trip.

Apart from raising the entire structure in 1932 to prevent flooding, and adding a summer kitchen and cool house to the grounds, this house hasn't changed much since its construction. On the other hand, in 1934, Henry did order a supply of yellow paint to redecorate the exterior. Unfortunately, the paint he actually received was pink. Since Henry couldn't be bothered to return it, he used the paint as-is, turning his entire home into a pink Village landmark that remained that way for decades.

Like other Village homeowners, Henry sold this house to the State of North Carolina in 1967 to help create Cape Lookout National Seashore, and was granted a Life Estate that let him continue living in the house. He was soon the last male resident of Portsmouth Village, and his death in early 1971 effectively signaled the end of a community that had weathered storms and hardship for over two hundred years. Shortly after his funeral,

Portsmouth's last two residents — Elma Dixon and Marian Babb — reluctantly packed their belongings, took a last look around, and departed for the mainland.

Track 55—Stop 5 to Stop 6

To continue on the tour, head back to the Salter Dixon House and main road and turn left to the Post Office.

Track 60: Post Office and General Store (2:20)

Narrator:

For the people of Portsmouth Village, the Post Office was a lifeline to the outside world. From Sears and Roebuck catalogs to kitchen furniture to fishing gear, everything the community needed arrived on the mail boat. Twice daily, a villager in a flat-bottomed skiff poled out to meet the boat and bring the latest mail back to the island. Once on shore, the letters and parcels were loaded onto a wheelbarrow and pushed to the Post Office. There, from 1926 to 1956, at 4PM every afternoon, the villagers would gather around as Annie Salter “called out the mail.”

You might want to step inside now and look at the exhibits as you continue to listen.

This combined Post Office and General Store served as the social heartbeat of the Village — a place to exchange news, play board games, make music, and while away the day.

During Portsmouth's peak years, three stores served its residents. Once the population dwindled and the last store closed however, the villagers had to resort to having even basic groceries brought by the mail boat.

By the time Annie Salter retired as postmaster in 1956, a postage stamp was the only item you could buy in Portsmouth Village. Within three years, even that service ended after the Post Office closed and the last postmaster, Annie's daughter Dorothy, moved away.

The store and post office you see today has been restored to the way it looked during the 1930s, when Annie kept the mail flowing and Portsmouth villagers connected to the wider world beyond. While you're here, spend a few minutes listening to the tour segments devoted to villagers' recollections of this place.

Track 65—Stop 6 to Stop 7

After you go back outside, the next closest tour stop is the School House. Just head down the straight road and follow the signs.

[The following Oral History selectable topics appear here on the playlist]

- Track 66: The Mail Boat
Speakers: Ira Babb, Lionel Gilgo, Jakie Robertson, Cecil Gilgo, Mary Dixon
- Track 67: The Store
Speaker: Cecil Gilgo
- Track 68: Socializing at the Post Office
Speakers: Cecil Gilgo, Emma Gilgo

Track 70: The School (1:14)

Narrator:

Portsmouth Village's very first school was a private academy, built in 1806. During the early 20th century, one-room schoolhouses — where up to seven grades sat together — were still the norm throughout rural North Carolina. In 1926, schoolteacher Mary Sneed Dixon moved into this building to teach readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic to several generations of local children. On her first day of teaching ten years earlier, forty students had sat in Miss Mary's classroom. Thirty-seven years later, on the day her tenure finally ended in 1943, her class numbered fewer than half a dozen.

Now step inside. As you look around at the exhibits, listen to the audio tour segments devoted to the recollections of some of the teachers and students who spent their schooldays on the island.

Track 75—Stop 7 to Stop 8

After you go back outside, the next nearest tour stop is the Methodist Church. Simply head back in the direction of the Post Office. The Church will be visible to the right.

[The following Oral History selectable topic appears here on the playlist]

- a. Track 76: Memories of School Days
Speakers: Mary Dixon, Cecil Gilgo,

Track 80: The Methodist Church (1:27)

Narrator:

Going to church was a vital part of community life for the residents of Portsmouth Village.

By the end of the 19th century, the village had two churches, one Methodist and one Primitive Baptist. In 1913, a hurricane destroyed the original Methodist church. This is the building that replaced it.

Fishermen, storekeepers, the men from the Life-Saving Service. . . everyone went to church. It was a place for Sunday services, weddings and funerals, but also for community events such as special dinners and the annual Christmas Party, when every villager received a gift. The preachers who served the Village didn't live in the community. They came by boat from Ocracoke or the mainland for services. Nevertheless, they helped keep the community together as it weathered good times and bad.

Now step inside the church and take a look around. While you're here, listen to the villagers' recollections of what it was like to attend services and social gatherings here.

Track 85: Stop 8 to 9

After you go back outside the church, notice the Washington Roberts house across the road. It's the next closest stop on the tour. Although it is not open to the public there is a small exhibit near the house.

[The following Oral History selectable topics appear here on the playlist]

- Track 86: Church Reminiscences
Speaker: Marion Gray Babb, Steve Roberts
- Track 87: Christmas on the Island
Speaker: Steve Roberts, Marion Gray Babb
- Track 88: Church Social Life
Speaker: Cecil Gilgo, Nina Mann Dixon
- Track 89: Burial on the Island
Speaker: Cecil Gilgo

Track 90: Washington Roberts House (1:20)

Narrator:

The Washington Roberts House dates from 1850, and is the oldest surviving home in Portsmouth Village. Washington Roberts grew up here, and later served at the Life-Saving Station for 30 years, while also working as a carpenter, boat builder, and coffin maker. The house is more structurally sound than many other buildings in the village, so it frequently served as a place for neighbors to seek shelter during deadly storms.

As the local population declined, the number of houses in Portsmouth Village dwindled. Many were abandoned and torn down. By 1880, only 44 houses remained. Then, in 1933, a major storm brought torrential rain and winds in excess of 100 miles per hour, destroying

even more of the community's homes. From that point onward, as one resident explained, "Everybody just left." By 1940, only 42 permanent residents remained in the village. By the 1950s, the population had dwindled to a mere 14. With the death in 1971 of the last male resident, Henry Pigott, the remaining two residents — Elma Dixon and her niece Marion Babb — moved away.

Track 100: Life-Saving Station (3:05)

Narrator:

From the late 1890s until it closed in 1937, the Life-Saving Station was a major presence in Portsmouth Village — a source of pride for the people who served here, and income for the Village. The United States Live-Saving Service opened it in 1894. One of three built on the Core Banks, it sits near the site of the old Marine Hospital.

Twenty-four hours a day, as a surfman manned the watchtower, highly trained crews stood ready to slide their oar-powered surfboats out of the boathouse doorway, down the ramp, and out to sea to rescue those on a troubled vessel. Foot patrols hiked the beaches as well, warning captains away from treacherous shoals with signal lights and looking for ships in trouble. Often, in poor visibility, even the surfmen would fail to spot an unlucky ship until after its crew had already run it aground.

You might want to step inside the Station now, and look at the exhibits as you continue to listen.

In 1899, a massive storm blew houses off their foundations, and even flooded the Life-Saving Station itself. But it was in 1903 that the Station and its crew faced their biggest challenge. With help from people from the Village, they saved 371 immigrants from a foundering ship called the *Vera Cruz* — a heroic task that saw the lifeboat make 32 trips, assisted by every other available boat.

The Station was a principal Village employer. Washington Roberts worked here for nearly 30 years, Jesse Babb for over 10. After the Coast Guard took over the Station in 1915, ship-to-shore radios reduced the need for its life saving services. During Prohibition, intercepting bootleg liquor smugglers became part of the station crew's duties.

Well into the 20th century, wealthy sportsmen from the Northeast also came to the Village, drawn here by the waterfowl wintering in Pamlico Sound. Private hunt clubs purchased village buildings and provided work for local cooks and guides. One club even bought the Life-Saving Station, building a landing strip to transport hunters in and out by airplane.

You can learn more about Village life by listening to the oral histories selections included in this audio tour.

Track 105—Stop 10 to Stop 11

After you head back outside, you can either turn left, follow the road to the Captains' graves and ocean beach or retrace your steps back to the Dock.

[The following Oral History selectable topics appear here on the playlist]

- Track 106: Station Routine
Speakers: Lionel Gilgo, Cecil Gilgo
- Track 107: Storms
Speakers: Nina Dixon, Lionel Gilgo
- Track 108: Wrecks
Speakers: Lionel Gilgo, Nina Dixon

Track 110 - Sea Captains' Graves (:59)

Narrator:

These graves are the final resting places of two seamen who passed away either on board their ships or here on the island. Captain Thomas W. Green of Providence, Rhode Island died in 1810 at age 32. Captain William Hilzey died in 1821 at age 36.

This cemetery sits on what was then the property of the Collector of Customs for Ocracoke Inlet. The Life Saving Station is across the creek. At the time, most graves were marked with a simple stone or wooden marker, which makes these carved stone markers quite unusual. Although the stories of the two sea captains have been lost in time, great care was clearly taken by their families to have these memorials shipped from the mainland and erected here.