

Lighthouses, Legends and Loggerheads: A Brief History of Bald Head Island, NC

Bald Head Island's history is peppered with colorful characters and connections. Through the years the island has been a breeding ground for boar, a prime hangout for bootleggers, a supplier of materials for cedar pencils, a major passenger pigeon roost, a Civil War fort, a nesting ground for loggerhead turtles, and a produce farm and fruit orchard. Pirates, lighthouse keepers, Native Americans, river pilots, ruffians, soldiers, farmers, and entrepreneurs of all types have come and gone, and yet, Bald Head Island's essence is virtually unchanged. This can only be because the island itself is a living thing, with its own integrity and spirit, its wild beauty more or less disregarding man's inclination to tinker.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, when pirates ruled the waters off the coast of North Carolina, Bald Head Island was a favorite attack base for these notorious buccaneers. In all, the waters surrounding Cape Fear were a hideaway for hundreds of pirates, the most famous of which were Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, and Stede Bonnet.

Bonnet, the so-called "Gentleman Pirate" from Barbados, was an educated retired military officer who turned to piracy in 1717 as a second career in order to escape what one historian tactfully referred to as "the discomforts he found in a married state." During his short stint as a pirate, Bonnet terrorized the Carolina and Virginia coasts aboard his sailing sloop *Revenge* with 10 guns and 70 men, and for a brief time even linked up with Blackbeard, a pirate who never carried the title "gentleman." In 1718 Blackbeard was cornered and killed aboard his sloop *Adventure* by two warships sent by the governor of Virginia. Just three weeks later Bonnet was captured at Bonnet's Creek in Southport by Colonel William Rhett of South Carolina and hanged near Charlestown. Their deaths marked a dramatic end to the Golden Age of Piracy in North Carolina.

Long before pirates ever discovered Bald Head Island's nooks and crannies, Native Americans hunted on Bald Head Island, collected oysters, and fished its surrounding waters in the spring and summer while maintaining permanent settlements on the mainland. The island was, in effect, a seasonal retreat for the Native Americans when supplies of corn or grain began running low.

Early river pilots were responsible for giving Bald Head Island its unique and descriptive name. Eager to offer their navigational services to ships approaching the entrance to the Cape Fear River, they took up watch on a high dune headland on the southwest point of the island. According to local lore, the headland was worn bare of vegetation, making it stand out in contrast to the forest behind it. This "bald" headland served as a reference point for ships entering the river, and the name Bald Head Island has endured.

1817 saw the construction of the island's most revered landmark and symbol, Old Baldy Lighthouse. Still the island's only "highrise," Old Baldy lighthouse was the second of three lighthouses built on Bald Head Island, and is the only one remaining. In 1903 the lighthouse was decommissioned when the Cape Fear Light was erected on the eastern end of the island, but it still serves as a prominent day marker for mariners. Due to restoration efforts by the Old Baldy Foundation and the generosity of hundreds of contributors, visitors to North Carolina's oldest lighthouse can climb up her 108 steps for a spectacular panoramic view of Bald Head Island.

The foundation of the Cape Fear Light can still be seen at the end of Federal Road across from three lightkeeper's cottages known as Captain Charlie's Station, after Captain Charles Norton Swan, a lighthouse keeper who lived with his family on Bald Head Island from 1903 until 1933. Now restored and available on our rental program, Captain Charlie's Station is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and still commands a sweeping view of the dunes and sea at the island's southeastern point.

In addition to lightkeepers, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the island was home to members of the U.S. Lifesaving Service, the predecessor to the modern day Coast Guard. Several buildings on the southeastern shore of the island overlooking Cape Fear and Frying Pan Shoals served as equipment storage and housing for the servicemen, and were known as "Cape Fear Station." The only remaining Lifesaving Station structure is a boathouse that was moved from the beachfront to back among the dunes where it is now a private residence.

Another symbol of the past presence of lightkeepers and lifesaving servicemen on the island is the Old Boat House on Bald Head Creek, built in 1903 to store supplies and boats. A change in the shape of the creek channel over the last ninety years makes it appear to have moved several hundred yards.

Despite subtle shifts in sand and sea, Bald Head Island remains much as it was centuries ago. It still serves as a natural laboratory for scientists and students interested in coastal ecology, a home for residents that share a kinship of spirit with the lightkeepers of days long past, and a timeless retreat for vacationers seeking rejuvenation and refuge from the mainland world.