

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Assateague Island Lighthouse

*Chincoteague
National
Wildlife Refuge*



This whimsically-painted lighthouse is a beacon to sailors and tourists alike. The present lighthouse, completed in 1867, stands 142 feet tall—a needed improvement from the original 42-foot tall structure built in 1833. Although times have changed, the Assateague Island Lighthouse continues to be a constant reminder of days gone by.



*Snow geese dot the sunset in Assateague.
Photo: Robert Wilson, USFWS.*

Why Assateague Island?

Originally, no light existed between Cape Henlopen, Delaware and Cape Charles, Virginia. In 1830 Congress appropriated money for a light in the general vicinity of Chincoteague Island. The following year, the Collector of Customs in Norfolk selected Assateague Island. The original Assateague Lighthouse was built on the southern tip of the island. Since barrier islands like Assateague shift and change, it is no wonder that the island has grown approximately 5 miles since the site was first designated. Over the years, a hook has developed to the south and the cove created by that hook has been gradually filling with sand.

*Moon over the
Assateague
Lighthouse. Photo:
Barron Crawford,
USFWS.*

When was the Lighthouse Built?

The original lighthouse was completed in 1833. Only 45 feet high, it proved to be ineffective in warning ships of the dangerous shoals that protrude from this section of the coast. In 1859 Congress appropriated funds for the current lighthouse and work began the next year, ceasing only for the Civil War. Work resumed in 1866, and on October 1, 1867, the current lighthouse became fully operational.



*Historic photo of the lighthouse c. 1955.
Photo: USFWS.*

What is the Lighthouse Made Of?

The foundation is made of stone and the lighthouse itself is made of brick. It was first painted with distinct red and white bands in 1963. The keeper's quarters, built in 1910, is made of concrete, in a two-story bungalow style. This bungalow is located across the road from the lighthouse. The lighthouse stands 142 feet high and is perched on a hill 22 feet above sea level. Its diameter is 27 feet and $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches at the base.



View from inside the lighthouse. Photo: USFWS

What about the Light?

Over the years, the lighthouse has had a number of different lights. The original tower had an Argand lamp system consisting of 11 small oil lamps hung on a frame, each with its own individual reflector. In 1867 this light system was replaced by a large, first-order Fresnel lens and a single oil lamp housing four wicks. Fish oil was the most commonly used fuel. The lens was in a fixed position, but shone in all directions. It was the lighthouse keeper's responsibility (along with as many as two assistants) to keep the fish oil lamps lit. The third light, installed in 1933, still used the Fresnel lens, but was a flashing electric light, lit by three 100 watt bulbs. This light was powered by generators.

A directional coded beacon, DCB, was installed in 1963 when electric lines first came to the island. It was replaced by a similar beacon in the early 1970s. The light consists of two large drums, each with a 1000 watt bulb. The light pattern of a double flash every five seconds is created by the alignment of one drum on top of another, twelve degrees apart, rotating at a specified rpm. The light is visible up to 22 nautical miles away.

Is the Lighthouse Still Used?

Assateague Lighthouse is owned and operated by the U.S. Coast Guard and is still used as an active aid in navigation. The keeper's quarters are used as seasonal housing for refuge temporary employees, volunteers and interns.

The first-order Fresnel lens that was at the Assateague lighthouse from 1867–1963 has been restored and is housed at the Oyster and Maritime Museum in Chincoteague. The lens is owned by the U.S. Coast Guard and is being loaned to the museum.

A Famous Wreck off the Coast of Assateague...

A number of wrecks have occurred off the coast of Assateague. Perhaps the most famous was the Dispatch, President Benjamin Harrison's official yacht. On October 10, 1891, the ship ran aground 2.5 miles east by north of what is now the Woodland Trail and 75 yards from the shore. The 730 ton schooner-rigged steamship was bound for Washington D.C. from New York City when she ran ashore just after 3 a.m. No deaths occurred, but what had once been the official yacht of Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland, and Harrison was a total loss.

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Chincoteague is one of over 500 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of lands and waters managed specifically for the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat and represents the most comprehensive wildlife resource management program in the world. Units of the system stretch across the United States from northern Alaska to the Florida Keys and include small islands in the Caribbean and South Pacific. The habitat of refuges is as diverse as the nation itself.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service also manages National Fish Hatcheries, and provides federal leadership in habitat protection, fish and wildlife research, technical assistance and the conservation and protection of migratory birds, certain marine mammals and threatened and endangered species.

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