



Chapter One

KEEPER OF THE OUTER BANKS

The Outer Banks of North Carolina are not of North Carolina at all. Any minimally detailed map, let alone a satellite view from space, shows they belong to the Atlantic Ocean, as much a part of the sea as fish and waves, and as much at the sea's mercy as sandcastles on the beach. This is particularly true of Hatteras Island, a 50-mile-long piece of dental floss constantly being redefined by wind and wave.

Tourists and developers long ago discovered the island, a spit of land that looks like an eastward-billowing sail. Much has changed on Hatteras as a result. Even more, however, has not. Elsewhere, fast-food restaurants, strip malls, and beach-dominating duplexes have overcome resort islands, including the more northern reaches of the Outer Banks. But the storm-buffeted Hatteras—with an average width of just two-thirds of a mile, often just five feet above sea level, as much as 30 miles from the mainland, and largely

protected against intruders by national seashore status—has kept its soul.

The Outer Banks soul is a complicated matter. Many acknowledge there is such a thing. Few, however, agree on what it is.

It is obvious that geography and the elements have pounded their imprint on it. Tom Carlson, in his book *Hatteras Blues*, puts it this way: “Early on, especially, it seems, the inhabitants of the Outer Banks didn’t merely adapt to their environment; they became indistinguishable from it—its moody, impetuous weather, its restless land, its willfulness, its stubborn insistence on beating the odds.”

The Outer Banks soul may well go back to the earliest settlers, Native Americans and Englishmen both, hardy souls who persevered even when God surely must have been having a laugh at their expense. It may go back to the Civil War, when, turning their backs on the rest of North Carolina, islanders were more supportive of the Union army than the Confederate because the federal government had always supported them. Or it may go back to the earliest keepers. Keepers of the lighthouse. Keepers of the lightship. Keepers of the lifesaving stations. They had tasks. They had responsibilities. They had duties.

The Hatteras soul has something to do with the iconoclastic nature of families who have lived on the island for generations, if not centuries. It has to do with the spirit of vacationers who would rather come to a run-down cottage or a two-star motel than to a luxury resort elsewhere. It has to do with the virtual inaccessibility of the island for much of its history and, even now, with the difficulty of traveling its length. It has to do with tolerating, even embracing, isolation and loneliness. It has to do with surf and wind and sun and living an outdoor life, whether it be that of wizened commercial fishermen who have worked the waters for a



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National Aeronautics and
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half-century, forty-something off-roaders, or teenage kite boarders. It has to do with finding value in everyday activities that might bemuse others. It has to do with not caring if others are bemused.

A local preacher, speaking of religion, though it could have been almost anything, not long ago gave an assessment of islanders that cut across denominational boundaries. "They're fatalists," he said. "They believe that their life here is a gift from God. If you were to say to them, 'There's a 90 percent chance that a tidal wave is coming in the next 10 years, and it's going to demolish this island,' they'd go, 'I don't want to live anywhere else.' If they were Pentecostals, they'd say, 'I'll just stay prayed up, honey!' Methodists will say, 'I hope everything will be all right!' They're going to live here until the end."

One might credit, too, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, which takes up two-thirds of the island, blocking construction within its boundaries and effectively limiting it elsewhere. The type of ever-expanding sprawl seen elsewhere cannot get a strong foothold on Hatteras. The long drives required to get from one town to another discourage a crushing influx of tourists and builders. Without the seashore, it is a virtual certainty that much of the island would have been developed. Many credit the seashore, though many also blame it for trying to take over. Those on Hatteras want few restraints.

Hatteras has remained Hatteras, even if here and there a Wings T-shirt emporium has popped up. Gee Gee Rosell, a local shop owner, credits the weather, in part. "It changes every day," she says. "The Weather Channel is my favorite television station. I probably wouldn't have a television if I didn't watch the Weather Channel."

Oh, yes. The weather. Weather changes are everyone's number-one topic on Hatteras, television set or not, and

with good reason. Malevolent storms whip themselves up quickly and strike with frightening dispatch. Have you never been caught in one?

A July visitor to the island goes for a morning beach walk, heading northward along the water line. Nothing suggests anything but a glorious start to the day. The newly arrived sun glistens on the water to the visitor's right, and those waves roll in and over his bare feet. The breeze is welcoming. Sea gulls laugh overhead. Fellow beach walkers smile, some stopping to say hello, most just nodding before quickly returning to their relentless scan of the sand for the perfect shell or piece of sea glass brought in by the overnight surf. There is no better place to be than here on Hatteras Island this morning. Three miles of walking go quickly.

Nearly reaching the fishing pier at Rodanthe, the visitor chances to take a look backward. A storm has been charging up behind him, from the south. Already, it blackens the sky. The wind has kicked up. He should have noticed. A few beach walkers seem momentarily unconcerned or, more likely, unaware. Most, however, are picking up their pace. The man turns back into the approaching storm, increasing his own pace. Raindrops begin to fall. Off in the distance, lightning appears over the ocean, flashing downward from cloud to wave.

Five minutes later, the pelting raindrops are strong enough to sting. The air is cooler. The wind is rougher. The sand, so inviting to walk upon minutes earlier, now slows every effort to make good time. The man's T-shirt is soaked. His leg muscles begin to tire. Other beach walkers, facing shorter distances, have become runners, or at least leaners into the wind. Urgency defines their movements. Many cut across the upper beach diagonally, seeking the wooden steps that will take them up and over the dunes to their cottages.

Lightning moves closer. It dives into the ocean on the

left again and reaches down to the land on the right as well. The beach, for the moment, seems almost a safety zone between the two expanses of electricity.

The beach, however, is no place to be. The evacuation of early-morning walkers and fishermen has quickened. Even the gulls have gone. The sands have become virtually empty as far as the visitor can see in the driving rain. If something were to happen to him, he muses, no one would find his body in time to help. He moves up to the next crossover, smiling at his motivation, falling in behind the last four people to leave this stretch of beach. Lightning flashes nearby, the thunder exploding immediately on top of the flash. The group chatters excitedly, nervously, walks faster, then breaks into a trot. Soon, the four peel off at a cottage, safe.

The visitor continues as the rain drives harder, catching up to a group of three college students, who in turn drop off a block later. The streets, lined with cottages, are now empty. It is the height of the summer season. It may as well be the dead of winter. No one is about. The rain beats harder. The lightning continues.

It will be nearly half an hour before the visitor, half-walking, half-jogging, reaches his room safely—and thankfully. He makes a mental note never again to take the Hatteras weather for granted.

The point is, this was not an extraordinary Hatteras storm in any sense. Dozens, scores, perhaps even a hundred storms are as bad each year. Many are extraordinary. Drownings are not uncommon. Nor are summer lightning strikes. Lightning took the life of an 18-year-old sitting on the beach near the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in 1997. It killed a 26-year-old woman in a Hatteras parking lot in 2002.

Such weather is all too familiar to those of the island, going back to the Native Americans who preceded recorded

history. Pirates were caught unaware, and fishermen, too, just as beachgoers and surfers and kite boarders are today. Any storm on the island is a sea storm, whether a rain-storm or an electrical storm, a windstorm or an ice storm, a nor'easter or a hurricane. They are all storms of the Atlantic Ocean. You may not have a boat. But on Hatteras, you are always at sea.

A Union soldier stationed on Hatteras during the Civil War described the difficulty of merely pitching a tent: "To have a tent prove false [on] a lone, barren isle, and in the midst of a terrific rain storm, be obliged to face a Hatteras wind, with scant protection against the fury, frantically holding fast to the frail canvas house, waiting for a lull in the blast (vain hope) to afford an opportunity to repeg, is so overpoweringly harrowing to the feelings, and so indescribably uncomfortable, that it is only those who actually experienced it who understand its supreme misery."

The keepers of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse and the lifesaving stations up and down the island knew as well as anyone of these nasty turns of weather, of the dangers that sprang up instantly. Theirs was a job of warning and protection.

It was no easy job to be a lighthouse keeper. From the earliest days, the task was carried out in loneliness, isolation, and brutal weather. Merely keeping the light on for passing ships was difficult. The light consisted of a lamp with a lighted wick, amplified by a lens. The keeper had to keep the wick constantly trimmed and supplied with whale oil, lard, rapeseed, and, later, petroleum products. The lens had to be kept soot-free. Many keepers were former sailors themselves. Others were women. All shared a difficult duty. There was no taking the day off for bad weather.

Above all, then, is the indomitable spirit of the people of the island themselves. Hatterasmen and Hatteraswomen

have proven more hardy than most people through the years. They have had to. Theirs has been a life of the sea and the wind, cut off from the lifelines available to everyone else. Anything they wanted, they had to fight for.

Then they had to keep it.

