

# SITE GUIDE

Listed on The National Register of Historic Places

## ~ SITE GUIDE ~ Chicamacomico Complex



## CHICAMACOMICO Life-Saving Station Historic Site & Museum



**THANK YOU FOR  
VISITING TODAY!**

### MEMBERSHIP

If you'd like to partner with Chicamacomico to help keep this historically significant site open for future generations, please consider becoming a member of the Chicamacomico Historical Association. Applications available in Gift Shop.

### WE RECYCLE:

If you do not wish to keep this Site Guide, please return it to the Gift Shop before you leave.

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This guide will help you navigate through this historic complex. You are visiting one of the most complete U.S. Life-Saving Service Station sites remaining in the nation, and the only one in North Carolina currently open as an educational museum.

*Before today's Coast Guard...there was*  
**THE U.S. LIFE-SAVING SERVICE**

Founded in 1871 and managed by the U.S. Treasury Department, these stations were pivotal in shaping America's history. Local men were hired and trained for one main task: to rescue those in peril from the sea. These brave, valiant "storm warriors" were willing to sacrifice their lives so that others might live.

*"The book says ya gotta go out;  
it don't say nothin' 'bout coming back!"*  
~ U.S. Life-Saving Service Keeper

**Your admission fees help ongoing restoration and preservation of this site for future generations!**

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

Match the LETTER of the buildings on the map to the CAPITAL letters inside this guide. The NUMBERS inside this guide match the ORANGE numbered squares located in the rooms of the 1874 Station and the 1911 Station.

**A. 1874 STATION** (*Entrance on Ocean-side ramp, or side door facing the South*)

Chicamacomico was the first US Life-Saving Service Station built and manned in North Carolina in 1874. Eventually the number of stations increased to twenty-nine – ten of them here on Hatteras Island. This Station was designed by F. W. Chandler in the Gothic style. It has been partially restored; full restoration awaits additional funding.

It is not in its original location, but has been moved five times — three times by storms and twice by man.

The Station's original location is now underwater in the Atlantic Ocean. In August 2007 this station was struck by lightning. The damage has been repaired thanks to generous donors.

*Note plaque on wall denoting donors.*

**1ST FLOOR — 1874 STATION**

**1** All equipment was kept here: the boat, the Life Car, the rescue beach cart and its components (faking boxes, sand anchors, projectiles, ropes, shovels, breeches buoy, crotch pole, Lyle gun, block and tackle, etc.) The Beebe-McClellan surfboat, No. 1046, is 26' and weighs 3800 lbs. empty, 8000 lbs. fully loaded. It is a self-bailing (through a series of hatched drains), self-righting (air ballast compartments) surfboat and was originally powered by oars and a steering rudder. When it first came to the site in 1911, it had a 8HP Aristox motor. A 12HP Aristox engine replaced the original on Feb. 11, 1918. This vessel is the actual surfboat used in the famous "Mirlo" rescue of 1918—the single-most highly awarded maritime rescue in US history.

**2** This area was used as a day-room for the crew. The dividing wall and doorway were restored in 2008. The diorama found here explains how the Breeches Buoy rescue equipment was set up for shore-to-ship rescues.

**2ND FLOOR — 1874 STATION**

**3** This portion of the Station is not yet accessible as restoration is needed. The upstairs eastern portion was used as the sleeping quarters for the crew and held 4 – 6 men. The Keeper had his own room and office, although very small. A ladder was used to access the open-air watch tower. The watch tower has not yet been rebuilt. Once the second floor is restored and supported, and the watchtower is in place, this area will be opened to visitors.

**B. WRECK POLE** (*It is a long walk to the pole. You may wish to view it from where you are now standing.*)

This training pole simulates the mast of a ship and was used by the crew to hone their skills for the Breeches Buoy rescue. Every Station had one of these practice poles. Repeatedly the men would drill, perfecting this shore-to-ship form of rescue. They were allotted only five minutes to have all equipment in place and to "rescue" the practice victim, a fellow surfman. It was due to such intense training that the men of the US Life-Saving Service were able to come the aid of **177,286** of **178,741** endangered souls!

*An AMAZING record — think how many people around the world are alive today because of these heroic rescues!!!*

**C. 1892 COOK HOUSE**

All cooking and bathing took place outside of the Station in a separate cook house. This ensured the safety of the 1874 Station in case a fire occurred. A water tank next to the Cook House supplied fresh water for cooking, bathing and drinking. Roof stabilization and restoration took place in 1983, and again in 2008.

**D. 1907 MIDGETT HOUSE**

This home was originally owned by Cornelius Payne Midgett (brother of Keeper John Allen Midgett, Jr.) and his wife, Daisy. It was then passed to Cornelius' niece, Wilma Midgett and husband Palmer (Oregon Inlet Group Commander, 5th Coast Guard District) who was stationed in the area in the 1940s. The house is open to the public to help interpret daily life on Hatteras Island in the early 1900s. It was donated and moved to the site in March 2005 and opened to the public in 2006.

**E. 1911 COOK HOUSE**

This cook house was much larger than the 1892 version. It holds a pantry on one side and a cold storage closet on the other. An outside access door allowed large blocks of ice to be placed within the cold storage area to prevent items from spoiling, although ice was a rare commodity. A cook stove helped warm the room, and a table, chairs and benches were placed so the men could take their meals in relative comfort. Two water tanks for drinking, bathing and cooking are located adjacent to this cook house. A unique bee-hive water cistern is located just outside the cook house door. It was used to collect rainwater through a system of gutters, and still holds water today. The water inside was only used for fire-suppression, in case a blaze began on the premises.

**F. 1911 STATION**

Built to replace the smaller 1874 Station, this 1911 Station was designed by Victor Mendlehoff in 1910 and looks very similar to George Russell Tolman's Quonochontaug style. The 1911 Station is considered the first of its type and is now referred to as the classic Chicamacomico style of architecture. It still rests on its original foundation. You will see many structures on this barrier island built with some or all of the elements found here—dormer windows, a tower, and cedar shakes. Cedar is extremely durable and can withstand the turbulent unpredictable coastal weather.

In 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service merged with the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service to form today's U.S. Coast Guard. During WWII over 40 men were stationed here, although the station was only designed for 8-10 men. This entire complex was decommissioned and abandoned in 1954. Physical Restoration: in 1983, the 1911 cook house roof and the 1874 cookhouse roof was restored; fence restoration took place in 1993; 1911 Station restoration began in the mid-1990s. All rooms inside this Station now house displays, artifacts, and exhibits.

**1ST FLOOR — 1911 STATION**

**4 PORCH**  
Added in 1928, the porch was built on the south side of the Station to take advantage of the prevailing summer southwesterly breezes. This is a favorite spot for our visitors.

**5 BOAT ROOM**  
This was originally the home to the rescue vessel. There were two large doors on both the north and the south side that swung open allowing the boat to be moved. In 1928, when steam heat and showers were added, this room was remodeled into a day-use area for the crew. In the 1930s and 40s the crew kept a pool table here for recreation. Sometimes they even played movies for the locals using a sheet as a screen. This room is now the Museum Gift Shop—stop back in before you leave to make your purchases!

**6 MEN'S SHOWER ROOM**  
In 1928, indoor plumbing was installed; the crew was delighted to have steam heat, showers and indoor toilets. Notice the sign on the wall which describes the slate shower in detail.

**7 DRY ROOM FOR WET CLOTHES**  
This is where wet outer clothing from beach patrols and rescues could be hung as it dried. The door on the north side led the surfman into the laundry area, which was added in 1938. From there they could exit the station through an outside door.

**8 ARMORY/ORDNANCE**  
Not open to the public. Black powder and weapons (during wartime) were stored in this area.

**9 KEEPER'S/CAPTAIN'S OFFICE**  
Here the Keeper kept his log books, wreck reports, charts, training guides, books, manuals, and paperwork related to the Station. In 1911, it was the only meeting room and also contained the library and a medicine chest.

**10 FRONT PORCH**  
This is the true "front" of the 1911 Station. Until relatively recent, the only road on Hatteras Island was a sand road located just east of the fence, traveling north and south. In 1954, a paved road (NC Highway 12) replaced the old sand road.

**11 OFFICER-IN-CHARGE QUARTERS**  
The officer in charge of the Station and crew was allotted private quarters with a private bath room.

**12 OAK STAIRWAY**  
Notice the worn steps— many feet have traveled this path since 1911.

**2ND FLOOR — 1911 STATION**

**13 CREW'S QUARTERS AND SHIPWRECK SURVIVORS ROOM**  
This room would hold the rescued, when needed. Notice the small doors? They are closets! To utilize all available space, space under each dormer window was filled and made into a closet; the doors originally held screens to allow the clothes kept inside to air properly. The pole was used to hold up the ceiling to Room #5.

**14 COOK'S ROOM** (*This room is not open to the public.*)  
A cook could be hired by the crew, but the cost of food and services had to be paid by the surfmen. This room was used as Cook's sleeping quarters during extended stays.

**15 SUPERINTENDENT'S QUARTERS**  
Each U.S. Life-Saving Service Station kept a room prepared for the visiting Superintendent of their district, or for visiting dignitaries.

**16 SURFMEN'S QUARTERS**  
Although smaller and oddly shaped, this room was used as sleeping quarters for the surfmen. Both this room and room #13 held four beds each for the life-saving crew of eight. The entrance to the watch tower is also found here.

**17 WATCH TOWER** (*Caution: Watch your head as you climb the ship's ladder leading to the tower! The architecture resulted in some low-hanging ledges. Please face the ladder as you climb and as you descend – it's the safest way.*)  
Notice the first level of the tower: this was going to be the floor of the tower, but the Pamlico Sound, which was a critical waterway, could not be monitored at this level, so one more floor was added. Here a surfman was always on watch, in rotating four hours shifts. Binoculars, a chart book, and a podium-type desk were the only items allowed. Not only were the men alert for ships in distress, but they charted the safe passage of vessels as they made their way up and down the coast.

**G. STABLE** (*This building is not open to the public at this time.*)  
Built in 1911, the stable housed two horses, which were used to pull the heavy rescue equipment. Before a "government team" of horses was issued, the surfmen would harness themselves to the heavy carts and push/pull the equipment to the rescue site— a tremendous challenge during nor'easters and hurricanes—and still very difficult in good weather!

**H. TRACTOR SHED** (*This building is not open to the public at this time.*)  
Built in 1932.

**I. SMALL BOATHOUSE**  
Built in 1897, this structure housed a smaller vessel used for rescues on Pamlico Sound. It is now utilized as the Visitors Center.