

Cape Hatteras: Birth of the National Seashore

Langdon Smith

America's first national seashore was Cape Hatteras, stretching roughly 80 miles along North Carolina's Outer Banks. When the new park was dedicated in 1958, federal officials and local dignitaries spilled water from Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser onto the sand of Coquina Beach, where it mingled with water from the Atlantic. National Park Service Director Conrad Wirth told onlookers that the mixing of water signified the "linkage between Yellowstone, our first national park, and Cape Hatteras, our first national seashore."¹ The comparison to Yellowstone was apt, but not for reasons that would have been appreciated at the time. After being established by Congress, both parks languished for nearly two decades before materializing in workable form. Yellowstone was virtually ignored by the federal government for six years after its creation in 1872, and the first park managers field tested the concept of a national park by trial and error for eighteen years.² Similarly, Park Service planners envisioning Cape Hatteras did not have a clear vision of what a national seashore was to be—and over the course of two decades its purpose evolved. Much like the original national park idea in early Yellowstone, the concept of a national seashore park took some time to solidify, and could have taken several different paths other than the one it eventually followed.

Authorized by Congress in 1937 when the Park Service was flush with New Deal funding and was using the young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to develop hundreds of recreation parks across the country, Cape Hatteras should have been on the fast track for this new type of federal-park development.³ Yet the project stumbled for several years and was generally considered dead until resurrected at the last minute by sizable donations from two charitable foundations. From its approval in Congress to the official establishment in 1953, sixteen years passed. Reasons for this initial failure included a lack of state government support, the disruption caused by World War II, the possibility of rich oil reserves along the continental shelf, and finally, the changing and sometimes contradictory visions of the seashore park communicated by Park Service planners. Without a clear understanding of what Cape Hatteras was to become, it was difficult for Outer Banks residents to support its creation.

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This case study of Cape Hatteras is valuable to our greater understanding about national parks in two key areas: First, the national seashore provides another example that new types of public lands are experimental, and require a certain break-in period. This also implies that Cape Hatteras could have materialized much differently than it eventually did. For example, if the seashore had been developed by CCC crews soon after it was established by Congress, the park would probably now have an impressive selection of bathhouses, cabins, community rooms and other guest facilities built in the government rustic style of architecture. This type of development was replicated in hundreds of recreational parks across the country during the 1930s.⁴ Second, Cape Hatteras provides an example of the challenges that were inherent in establishing a national park on private land—typically the case with all parks established in the eastern United States. Unlike the earliest western national parks carved out of the public domain, creating eastern parks required both local and state cooperation, and required that no federal money could be used to purchase land.⁵ Without benefactors such as the Rockefeller and Mellon families, which provided money to purchase parklands, very little of this eastern conservation work could have been accomplished.

Origins

As with Yellowstone and many of our national parks, the origins of the idea to establish Cape Hatteras are difficult to pin down. Ben MacNeill, a writer for *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, N.C., suggested that the seeds of the idea were planted on a boat ride during efforts to establish the Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kill Devil Hill on Bodie Island (Figure 1). On December 28, 1928 a barge crossing Currituck Sound on its way to laying the cornerstone for the memorial ran aground on a shoal. Notables on board included North Carolina Congressman Lindsay Warren, who later drafted the legislation creating Cape Hatteras, Governor Angus McClean, who at the time was working to obtain land needed to establish Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and Orville Wright. While waiting for help to arrive, Warren and his companions on the barge “laid hold upon the idea that dreary night in the middle of Currituck Sound,” according to MacNeill.⁶

The newspaperman also assigned credit for the national seashore idea to Frank Stick, a noted artist, conservationist, and Outer Banks land investor who donated the land to create the Wright Brothers Memorial.⁷ Stick was likely the first to put his ideas into print with an article in the local newspaper in 1933 titled “A Coastal Park for North Carolina.” Stick laid out a plan to first restore eroding beaches and dunes, and then to replant native vegetation using Depression-era federal work programs such as the CCC and Works Progress Administration (WPA). This was to be followed by development of park facilities and a new coastal highway to provide access for tourists. Stick



Figure 1. Visitors stop near windswept Kill Devil Hill, where the Wright Brothers made their historic flight. Approximate date early 1930s. Courtesy of Cape Hatteras National Seashore.



Figure 2. Early visitors to Cape Hatteras National Seashore had to rely on ferries like this one at Oregon Inlet, which separated Bodie and Hatteras islands. Approximate date 1934. Courtesy of Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

also sold the idea to the Park Service, arranged for the first donations of land for the future park, and together with his son, writer David Stick, spent many years tenaciously supporting the seashore park.⁸

Convincing the Park Service to investigate the possibility of a park along the Outer Banks was not difficult for Frank Stick because the agency was already looking for coastal projects. Water sports and time spent at the beach had become Americans' favorite recreational activity, yet only one percent of the country's coastline was under federal government ownership, and public access was becoming an increasing concern. The agency had identified ten potential park areas along the Atlantic, including Hatteras Island.⁹

Lois Croft completed the first official Park Service investigation of the Outer Banks site in 1934, preparing a report for Wirth, then assistant director of the agency. Croft was impressed with the expansive sounds, which stretch for one hundred miles from Currituck and Albemarle in the north to giant Pamlico in the south. These protected water bodies, he argued, would provide unlimited opportunities for boating and fishing. He worried that the sounds were so vast that they would overwhelm the long, narrow barrier islands, but "this, however, will depend on the developed meaning of a seashore park," Croft reported, suggesting the experimental nature of what was being proposed.¹⁰ He was also concerned about the isolation of the islands and the difficult access by ferry (Figure 2) to the mainland:

While it is true one has a feeling of isolation, almost desolation, on the narrow stretches – water seems to be everywhere – and it is not difficult to imagine the waves rolling over to the sound – in the writer's opinion, there is a place in our national park system for a type of topography capable of producing such an experience.¹¹

Another characteristic that made Cape Hatteras especially appealing was the rich history of the region. Three sites in particular were noted by park planners for their national significance.¹² First was Kill Devil Hill, where Wilbur and Orville Wright made the first powered flights in a heavier-than-air machine on December 17, 1903. Second was the site of Fort Raleigh on Roanoke Island, where the first English attempts at colonization in the 1580s ended with the disappearance of 116 colonists. Third was Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, which at 208 feet, is the tallest in the United States (Figure 3). The lighthouse was constructed in 1870 at the cape to guide ships through the treacherous waters commonly known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. More than 600 ships wrecked on the shifting sand shoals off the cape, and many islanders served as rescue crew members of the U.S. Life Saving Service at stations spread along the islands (Figure 4).¹³

Development Plans

The initial plans for developing the seashore park began to so-



Figure 3. The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in its original location. The lighthouse was moved 1,600 feet in 1999 to protect it from an eroding shoreline. Date unknown. Courtesy of Cape Hatteras National Seashore.



Figure 4. This lumber schooner washed ashore on Ocracoke Island was one of more than 600 ships wrecked in the treacherous waters along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Date unknown. Courtesy of Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

lidy in 1935 after a second inspection by Charles Peterson, a seasoned landscape architect in the Park Service Branch of Plans and Design.¹⁴ Peterson traveled to Cape Hatteras with Chief Architect Thomas Vint and Assistant Director Hillory Tolson, where he wrote enthusiastically about the islands joining the national park system: “It has a magnificent stretch of seacoast practically undeveloped offering scenic and recreational possibilities of a sort not now provided.” The report generated from their trip recommended what eventually became the final boundaries of the new reserve. The northern boundary began on Bodie Island just south of the bridge connecting Bodie with Roanoke Island, and the southern tip of Ocracoke Island (once part of Hatteras Island) became the southern boundary of the park (Figure 5).¹⁵

The three planners also recommended a large-scale “bathing establishment” be constructed on Bodie Island Beach, a section of the island already popular with locals and the rare visitor. Reforestation was suggested to restore original forests “destroyed by lumbering and grazing.” A “lodge and camp development” was also listed as a possibility on a protected site in the woods near the cape on Hatteras Island. Funding for land acquisition and improvements, they suggested, might come from donations of land, or federal purchase through the Emergency Relief Administration or WPA.¹⁶

This rough initial development plan was not something unique to Cape Hatteras, but part of a park-development formula that was being applied

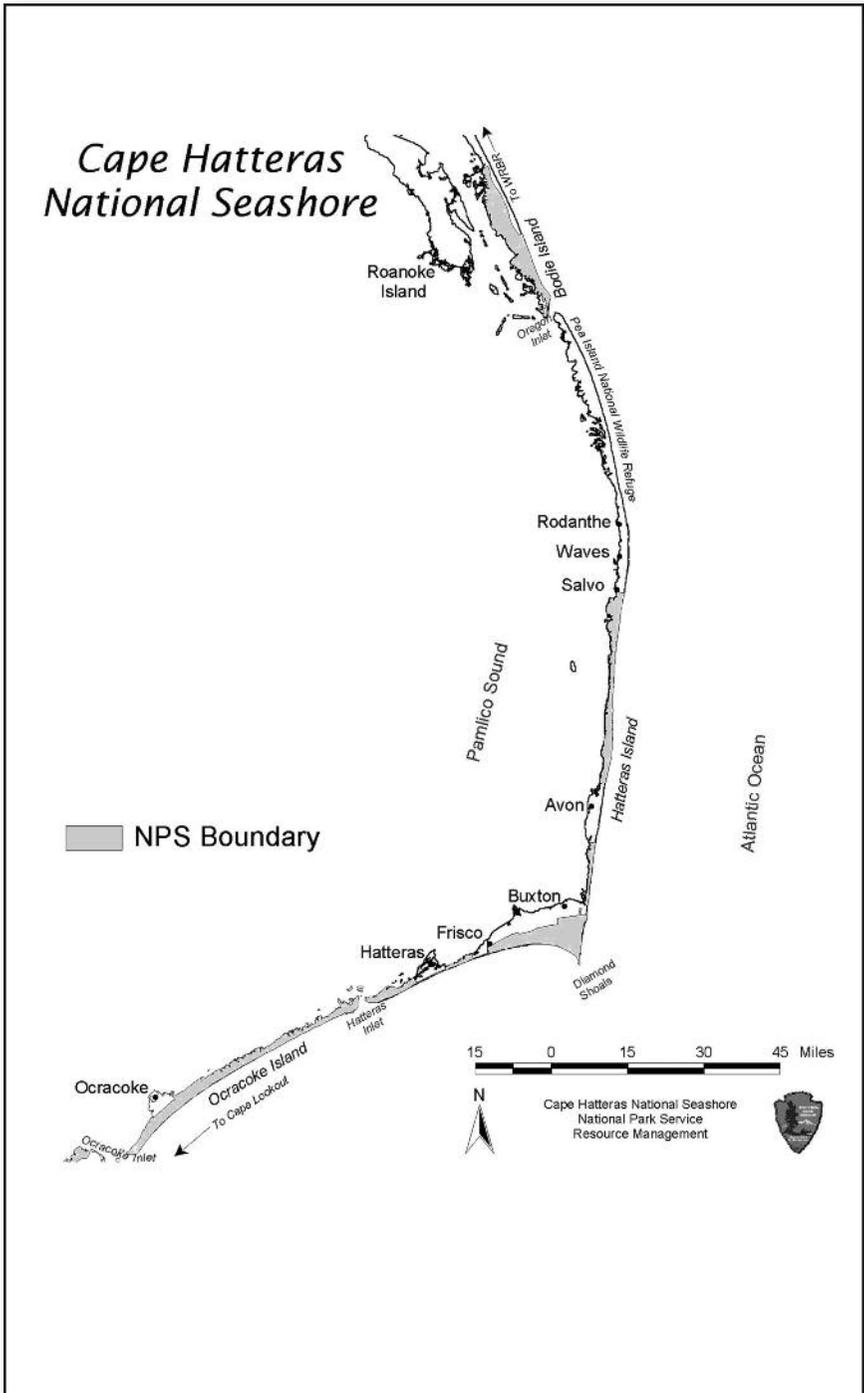


Figure 5. Cape Hatteras National Seashore stretches roughly 80 miles along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Courtesy of Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

by the Park Service across the country during the 1930s. President Roosevelt's New Deal economic programs were responsible for unprecedented gains in parklands. Between 1933 and 1942 young enlistees in the CCC built more than five hundred state parks within the United States. The Park Service oversaw this process and produced master plans for designs that could be replicated across the country.¹⁷ Vint, one of the first landscape architects hired by the agency in 1918, played an important role in this park development as director of the Branch of Plans and Design.¹⁸

Despite the enthusiasm of the agency's landscape architects, there remained debate about what sort of federal reservation Cape Hatteras should become. Another site investigation a few months later in 1935, this time by Ben Thompson, an assistant to the director, illustrated these tensions. Thompson wrote a memo to Director Arno B. Cammerer arguing that the area was not suitable for national park status:

I believe the area is not suitable for national park status, because:

1. A national park is not built; it is preserved.
2. The Cape Hatteras area must be built – the soil, the vegetative cover, the roads and accommodations – form almost a Paleozoic (sic) nothingness. Excepting the few square miles of the Cape Hatteras Woods, the Cape Hatteras Island is almost entirely de-vegetated and wind-swept away. Storms and the ocean wash across it and the other islands of “The Banks” periodically.¹⁹

Instead of a national park, Thompson suggested the Park Service should create a new type of reserve called a “National Beach,” and develop standards for such areas.²⁰ This confusion about the type of park that was being proposed continued to challenge Park Service planners for more than twenty years.

Roadblocks

As was common in the 1930s, Rep. Lindsay's bill establishing Cape Hatteras in August 1937 prohibited the use of federal money to purchase parklands. The result was to place all responsibility for acquiring the land needed for the park with the state of North Carolina. This fact, combined with the entry of the United States into World War II and the possibility of oil reserves lying off the coast, almost proved fatal for this new use of public lands.

Efforts to secure parklands looked very promising initially. Anticipating approval for the park in Congress, in 1935 the North Carolina General Assembly established the Cape Hatteras Seashore Commission to acquire land and to hold it until the federal government was prepared to develop the park. Frank Stick was named chair of the commission, and was also responsible for

the first donation of land. Stick had earlier sold several tracts along the Outer Banks to brothers John and Henry Phipps, members of the well-known Pennsylvania steel family. He convinced the brothers to donate roughly 1,000 acres of their land on Hatteras Island to the proposed seashore park. Several thousand more acres of donated land quickly followed.²¹

Local support for a national park and the federal government in general was also strong. Much of this support was due to the large amount of restoration work being accomplished by workers of the CCC. North Carolina officials secured New Deal funds to replant native vegetation and slow the forces of erosion on the beaches and dunes. More than 1,500 workers were recruited and spread across 125 miles of the North Carolina coast. They constructed 600 miles of sand fences along 115 miles of beach, planted more than 2.5 million seedlings, and reseeded 142 million square feet of native grasses. Although many of the workers were brought from other areas of the country, these projects created hundreds of jobs for the men of the Outer Banks. By 1940 36 percent of those employed in the Outer Banks were paid by the U.S. Government.²²

By 1941 however, the looming war had caused shifting priorities in the federal government and many of the New Deal programs, including the government's huge park-development project, were in jeopardy. A bill had been introduced in Congress to abolish the CCC. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes hoped to save the CCC by transferring responsibility from the Army to the Interior Department, but with the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 it became clear that the program was dead.²³ The large federal presence on Cape Hatteras soon all but disappeared.

The attention of Frank Stick, the park's chief lobbyist, also shifted. He believed efforts to create the park were well underway and resigned his position with the seashore commission and moved from the area to pursue other real estate interests and conservation projects. He soon turned his attention to the island of St. John, and approached Laurance Rockefeller about creating Virgin Islands National Park, a plan that had been in the works since the late 1930s. Stick was hired by the well known philanthropist to acquire the necessary lands for the park, which was established by Congress in 1956.²⁴

As federal jobs and funding disappeared and the war took its toll, many locals lost interest in the project as well. One Park Service planner described how ineffective the Cape Hatteras Seashore Commission had become in acquiring land for the park in a report to Conrad Wirth: "They are actively engaged with their own business interests and give little time or attention to the project, so that at the present time practically nothing is being accomplished toward its fulfillment."²⁵

With Stick, the park's local booster, out of the picture there was not a strong voice to defend the park when possible oil and gas reserves were

identified along the coast, and this became a major obstacle.²⁶ Manteo businessman and State Representative Theodore Meekins had supported the national park proposal at Cape Hatteras when it had meant federal jobs, but he saw more potential in oil and gas revenues. In 1945 Meekins sponsored a bill to stop any further acquisitions of land for the seashore park until the possibility of oil and gas reserves could be explored. Most in the Outer Banks thought the park proposal was dead.²⁷

Back on Track

Fortunately for park supporters, the North Carolina legislation halting land acquisition for the national seashore expired after four years. When no rich oil and gas reserves materialized, park supporters regrouped and began a campaign to finish the work that first began in 1933. However, major challenges remained. First, during the war years some of the areas proposed for the park had been developed and were no longer suitable. This meant that the Park Service documents and initial plans were outdated and inaccurate. Local business owners and land developers fighting the project seized upon these inaccuracies and used them to build opposition. Second, the state of North Carolina owned land within the proposed seashore that it was attempting to develop as a state park. As a result, some factions within state government were not solidly behind creation of a national park. Third, Congress had imposed a 1952 deadline for acquiring the lands for the national seashore. After August 17, 1952 unless an extension was enacted, all the donated lands were to revert back to the previous owners.²⁸

It was Frank Stick who reignited the work to create the park, this time with the help of his son David, who had recently returned to the Outer Banks after serving in the Marine Corps during the war. The Sticks urged their contacts in the Park Service, including Associate Director Arthur Demaray, and Wirth, who was then Chief of Land and Recreational Planning, once more to endorse the seashore park. Both men remained optimistic about Cape Hatteras, and they requested that North Carolina officials reinstate the Cape Hatteras Seashore Commission for the acquisition of land.

Unfortunately for supporters of the project, the Park Service was slow to update plans for the park once the project was rekindled, and as a result, there were many misconceptions that fueled local opposition. Victor Meekins, editor of the *Coastland Times* newspaper in Manteo, hammered the Park Service for these missteps. "We can enumerate a lot of stupid things done in the past by Park Service employees and Park advocates," he wrote. "Without these mistakes, the willful purveyors of misinformation who have done so much harm, and who have made so many people unhappy, could never have accomplished the dire results they now are gloating over."²⁹

The most notable miscommunication was about the size of the park. An outdated brochure published in 1941 was still in circulation in the Outer Banks that stated the seashore park would extend to the north all the way to the Currituck Lighthouse in Corolla, and this included areas that had since been developed heavily. This was roughly forty miles farther along the coast than planners were considering when the project was brought back to life in 1949 and was almost twice the acreage.³⁰

In April 1949 David Stick wrote to Demaray, describing how the outdated information was creating problems:

...[A]side from a small group of individuals who hold speculative real estate properties, the main opposition seems to come from those people who are still under the impression that the Cape Hatteras National Seashore would include almost every acre of land from Ocracoke to the Virginia line.³¹

Stick urged park planners to produce a new brochure which demonstrated the new boundaries of the park, and to send officials to the Outer Banks to tell the locals in person what they could expect.

While uncertainty was the message from the Park Service, indifference was the message being sent by the State of North Carolina. George Ross, director of the Department of Conservation and Development, was responsible for reactivating the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Commission, but he did not form the commission for several months after the project was revived. The commission met only a few times in 1950 and not at all in 1951 and so no real attempts were made to acquire the needed land. David Stick wrote several letters to both Governor W. Kerr Scott and Wirth, urging the men to pressure Ross into action, and he suggested that Ross was attempting to abandon the national seashore project so that North Carolina could then develop a state park instead.³² By the spring of 1952 with no progress made by the state and the Congressional deadline approaching, the national seashore project appeared to be dead once again.³³

A National Seashore Emerges

The final revival of the national seashore came less than two months before the looming deadline from Congress. State officials announced on June 19, 1952 that an unnamed private source had offered to contribute \$618,000 in matching funds to purchase the necessary lands. Despite protests by some local landowners, a hastily convened Cape Hatteras National Seashore Commission voted in favor of accepting the donation and requested the appropriation of the matching \$618,000 from the state's emergency funds. News that an anonymous donor was going to save the proposed national

seashore was a shock to residents of the Outer Banks, especially those who were comfortable with the idea of the project being dead.³⁴

Some opponents focused their wrath on the mysterious donor, suggesting there had to be something inappropriate that demanded such secrecy. "There is chicanery [sic] either on the part of the government officials or private sources in the donation," wrote the editor of the Elizabeth City *Independent Star*, who was known for his opposition to the project. He also questioned the wisdom of developing a park on such a "barren coastland."³⁵ Over the following week the *Independent Star* demanded that the Park Service reveal the donors and put an end to the various rumors circulating in the Outer Banks.³⁶

By the end of August 1952 the federal government finally took the offensive and responded to the growing misconceptions, rumors and opposition. Interior Secretary Oscar Chapman identified the Old Dominion Foundation and the Avalon Foundation as the donors of the matching funds. The foundations, operated by the Pittsburgh Mellon family, had requested the anonymity, Chapman said, to avoid receiving a flurry of similar requests.³⁷ Paul Mellon, and his sister, Ailsa Mellon-Bruce, had a keen interest in protecting coastal landscapes, and they also funded a second round of seashore studies to identify potential parklands. This Park Service study surveyed the Atlantic and Gulf coasts again, and for the first time scrutinized the Pacific Coast and the shores of the Great Lakes.³⁸

To put a more positive face on the proposed seashore park, federal planners published a new brochure for locals. The twelve-page document included a history of the project, methods to be used to acquire lands and negotiate a fair price, information about hunting and fishing rights, and a prediction of the riches local communities could expect to enjoy from a nearby national park. The Park Service used the example of tourists visiting Glacier National Park during the summer of 1951, which produced \$12,287,000 in tourism revenue for the state of Montana.³⁹

Most important to these efforts to calm local opposition, however, was the decision by Director Wirth to travel to the Outer Banks to sell the idea to local residents personally. Wirth was joined by North Carolina Congressman Herb Bonner on the trip in September 1952. They spent two days visiting each of the communities along the proposed seashore, including Ocracoke, Hatteras, Frisco, Buxton, and Avon.⁴⁰ Wirth returned to Washington, D.C., with five major concerns expressed about the project: 1. boundaries for the reserve; 2. continued commercial and sport fishing; 3. hunting rights; 4. local access to the beaches; and 5. future development plans. He responded to each concern in a "Letter to the People of the Outer Banks" published in the *Coastland Times*.⁴¹

Wirth's trip to the Outer Banks became significantly more than a sales

job—it produced substantial changes to the proposed national seashore. Local residents convinced Wirth to have planners redraw the boundaries of the reserve to give the communities more room to grow. The old boundaries were “too confining,” Wirth said in his article in the *Coastland Times*, and so the boundary lines around communities were moved closer to the ocean. The new boundaries also excluded all but 150 feet of Pamlico Sound, and Wirth assured people of the Outer Banks that their hunting and fishing rights would be managed by North Carolina regulations and existing federal regulations, just as they had been for many years. Wirth also reminded locals that the law creating the national seashore guaranteed that hunting would continue on Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge on Hatteras Island, and on an additional 2,000 acres on Ocracoke Island.⁴²

Another critical issue to be resolved was beach access with automobiles, and this remains a controversial issue in the Outer Banks today. Wirth promised residents of the Outer Banks that there would always be access to the beaches for both locals and visitors, but warned that certain regulations would be needed to protect the resources of the park and to protect visitors. For example, to prevent dune erosion, park managers would have to designate only certain areas of the beaches open to vehicle use. Likewise, for both personal safety and practical aspects, areas designated for ocean fishing would be separated from areas designated for swimming and enjoying the beach.⁴³

The issue that probably concerned Outer Banks business owners the most was the role of the Park Service in future development of the national seashore. They wanted to know if government facilities would be in competition with the offerings of local businesses. Wirth promised locals that the business of taking care of tourists would be left to Outer Banks communities. “The National Park Service has always believed in free enterprise,” and “no developments for tourist accommodations are planned or will be permitted on government property,” he wrote.⁴⁴

The next logical step for the Park Service was to begin securing parklands. With money in hand, the agency immediately opened an office in Manteo to begin acquiring land through willing purchase, and condemnation proceedings where necessary, from roughly 253 landowners within the boundaries of the seashore park.⁴⁵ A.C. Stratton, director of the acquisition office, had hoped to complete the purchases in four months, but after six months of work, had yet to purchase a single piece of property. The problem was not unwilling sellers, although a small percentage fought the purchases, but the lack of clear title for virtually the entire area. In one example, the registered owner of a parcel named the Lewis Tract had died in 1800, and there had been no records of land division filed since. The owners had a “cloudy title” for the property and were willing to sell to the Park Service, but the federal attorneys involved were not willing to take ownership under those circumstances.⁴⁶

In other cases the land had been inherited, but because of shifting county boundaries over the years there had been confusion about where to actually register a deed. A local newspaper writer described the circumstances that led to such confusion: "They live a long way from the courthouse—and they have lived in three different counties during the past 300 years and even if they wanted to go to their courthouse and register and record their deeds, there has been a lot of doubt about whether to go to Currituck, to Swan Quarter or Manteo."⁴⁷ The final solution to the title problems was for the Park Service to seize the land through "Friendly Condemnation." This meant that landowners had agreed upon a purchase price and were participating in condemnation proceedings voluntarily because that was the best method for clearing up the title problems.⁴⁸

Finding Its Identity

The question of exactly what sort of federal park had been created at Cape Hatteras was not immediately answered when the park began its first few years of operation. The same uncertainty about the park's identity that had dogged Park Service planners from the beginning was also apparent in the early accounts of the park by outsiders. *The New York Times*, for example, described Cape Hatteras in terms typical of the large western wildland national parks such as Yellowstone or Glacier. Calling the area "the most extensive tract of undeveloped seashore remaining on the Atlantic Coast, the newspaper reported the area would be "permanently reserved as a primitive wilderness to protect the unique flora and fauna." However, in the following paragraph the writer mentioned that hunting and fishing rights were protected, and explained to readers that "it is not intended as a national park, nor does it have the characteristics of a national park."⁴⁹

Uncertainty about the identity of the new reservation was also apparent in the shifting name of the park. Congress originally established "Cape Hatteras National Seashore" in 1937, but in 1940, responding to pressure from locals to protect hunting and fishing rights within the park, Congress amended the act to change the name to "Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area." The Park Service used the latter name in all of its early publications until about 1968, while local newspapers used both names at various times. Locals also referred to the reservation generally as a "national park," but also added the word "park" to create yet a third name, "Cape Hatteras National Seashore Park," suggesting they were not comfortable with the general reference of a "national seashore."

The shifting notion of a national seashore is not surprising given the experimental nature of the idea. Many of the heavily impacted areas within Cape Hatteras did not meet the pristine characteristics of our treasured na-

tional parks. Yet some of the more remote and wild areas were awe inspiring and clearly surpassed the lesser standards of hundreds of recreational parks developed across the country where landscapes were more constructed than preserved. Park Service naturalist H. Raymond Gregg made this point clearly in the following description of the wild nature of Cape Hatteras. He had just watched a Navy blimp and two fighter planes fly by the beach:

Yet, these few reminders of the works and wars of man fell into perspective here as transient things measured against the timelessness of the eternal forces at work in the sea and on the fragile front of a continent whose duration is counted in tens of millions of years. No Coney Island or Jones Beach, this. Mainly freed from the artificialities that permeate our daily lives, here for a while, I rejoiced in the well-preserved spirit of isolation on this vast, vacant beach, and quietly enjoyed the companionship of simple things of nature that compose and give life to this wild, desolate place beside the sea.⁵⁰

Just as the national park idea was field tested in Yellowstone in the 1870s and 1880s, the national seashore idea needed some time to gain acceptance by both federal land managers and the public. In fact, Gregg went on to suggest that a “shakedown period of development and use patterns” was needed at Cape Hatteras before the national seashore was complete.⁵¹ Once opened to the public, visitors saw that there was a place for such a park in the national system, and the lessons learned in Cape Hatteras helped protect hundreds of miles of shoreline under the threat of commercial development.

Broader Significance

Once the national seashore idea was established, it spread quickly along the coastlines and lakeshores of the United States. In 1959, less than a year after the water from Old Faithful was spilled onto the sand of Coquina Beach on Cape Hatteras, Wirth was in another town hall meeting selling the idea of the country’s second national seashore to a crowd of about five hundred residents of Eastham, Massachusetts. The topic of this meeting was the establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore.⁵²

The work to create Cape Cod was a clear progression from the accomplishments at Cape Hatteras. Two Park Service officials from Cape Hatteras, Robert Gibbs, the interim superintendent, and George Thompson, land acquisition officer, were present with Wirth at the first meeting of the Cape Cod Advisory Commission. The commission, comprised mostly of local Cape Codders, was established by Congress to coordinate local and federal efforts to establish the park. Gibbs later left Cape Hatteras to become the first su-

perintendent at Cape Cod. One of the first orders of business for the newly appointed commission was a site visit to Cape Hatteras to learn the potential for Cape Cod. As commission chairman Charles Foster noted, for many of the members "it was their first look at a national park area."⁵³

There were similarities in the legislation establishing the two seashore parks, including the protection of fishing and hunting rights for local residents, however it was the differences in the Cape Cod park bill because of hard lessons learned at Cape Hatteras and other parks that had the greatest consequences. This seashore bill, which had the strong support of President John Kennedy, authorized federal funding to buy the lands needed to create the park and this precedent became a conservation milestone. Gone were the days of waiting for private funding to support government conservation, and what Wirth called the "beg, borrow, or steal system." As the former parks director noted, "Cape Hatteras and Cape Cod national seashores opened up a whole new phase in conservation."⁵⁴

Several more national seashores followed, including Point Reyes in California and Padre Island in Texas in 1962, and Assateague Island in Maryland and Virginia, and Fire Island in New York in 1965. After Cape Lookout in North Carolina was established in 1966, the idea spread inland to the Great Lakes with the establishment of several national lakeshores, beginning with Pictured Rocks in Michigan. During the fourteen years following the dedication of Cape Hatteras, twelve federal seashore or lakeshore parks were established, protecting more than 700 miles of shoreline.⁵⁵ The national seashores, especially Cape Hatteras, challenged the National Park Service to create a different kind of park. With this experience the agency acquired the adaptability to absorb other new types of units—national recreation areas, trails, scenic rivers, preserves and reserves—that entered the system in the following decades.

Notes

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