

Instead of using the common terms “staircase” or simply “stairs,” older Ocracoke islanders are more likely to say “stairsteps.”

I live in a typical small island “story and a jump” house with very steep and narrow stairsteps. One day I got to thinking about my and other unconventional stairsteps on Ocracoke. I have collected some photos, but first some information about stairs..

For reasons of safety and comfort various guidelines for the construction of stairs have been established. Here are the general rules:

- The run length should be 9 inches (23 cm) or longer for enough foot space.
- The riser height should be 8.25 inches (21cm) or less.
- The nosing protrusion length should be 1.25 inches (3.2 cm) or less to prevent tripping on the nosing.
- The headroom is recommended to be 6 feet and 8 inches (203 cm) or higher.
- The stair width is recommended to be 35 inches (89cm) or wider.
- The height of the handrail, measured from the nose of the tread, is recommended to be between 34 and 38 inches (86 to 97 cm).
- The comfortable size of handrail diameter is between 1.25 and 2.68 inches (3.2 to 6.8 cm).
- Doors are normally not allowed to swing over steps. The arc of doors should be completely on the landing or floor.
- A general rule-of-thumb is that $2 \times \text{the riser height} + \text{tread length} = 24 - 25$.

Below is a photo of my interior stairs. My house was built in 1865, long before any standards were established on Ocracoke Island. The riser height is 9”; the tread, or run length, is $10\frac{1}{2}$ ”; and the nosing protrusion is $1\frac{3}{4}$ ”. As you can see, although the run length is adequate, the riser height is $\frac{3}{4}$ ” higher than recommended, and the nosing protrusion is $\frac{1}{2}$ ” more than standard.

Headroom at the doorway is only 5’ 8”. And the stair width is a mere 27”. Also, there is no handrail at all, and the door, although it does not swing over the steps, is not at floor level.

Using the above formula we get $(2 \times 9) + 10\frac{1}{2} = 28\frac{1}{2}$, significantly more than 24 - 25.



My stairs are somewhat extreme, but there are many other older island homes with unconventional stairsteps. Below are a few photos.

These stairs are not quite as steep and narrow as mine, even though the house is somewhat older:



These stairs are in a small older building that was converted to a dwelling about 40 years ago:



These next two photos show an unusual set of steps in another 100+ year old house. Notice that, although the stairs are steep, the risers are slanted to provide more toe room:





This next set of stairs is in Elsie's House on Howard Street. Note that the stairs originally made a ninety degree turn at the bottom to open into the living room, but when the stairs were reoriented to come straight down the original wedge-shaped step was retained. Also, note that the risers are of different heights. The highest riser is $10 \frac{1}{2}$ "; the tread is $7 \frac{1}{2}$ " ($2 \times 10 \frac{1}{2}$) + $7 \frac{1}{2}$ = $28 \frac{1}{2}$, making a very steep step!

The stairway is 29" wide.



The next photo is of my favorite stairsteps, in the "Hurricane House." WATCH YOUR STEP IT MAY BE THE LAST!!



Finally, the next photo shows a staircase in the Castle Bed and Breakfast. Built by eccentric entrepreneur Sam Jones in the 1950s, the risers are only 6", a height that Sam found most comfortable. The treads are 11 1/2", so $2 \times 6 + 11 \frac{1}{2} = 23 \frac{1}{2}$, just slightly less than the ideal.



One final piece of advice: If you live in, rent, or visit an older island home, enjoy its quirks and oddities, but Watch Your Step!!