



Gale force winds lashed the waters of the Atlantic along the south Jersey coast to the point of fury. Driving snows of a late winter storm cut visibility to an arm's length. In the distance, the sound of huge waves breaking over shoal and beach . . . a sound terrifying to a seaman's ear . . . could be heard.

Aboard the *Mermaid*, a transport ship of the Crown, bound from Halifax to New York with troops to fight against the American Revolution, the master barked orders to the helm and to the men high

in rigging trimming the sails, hidden from view by snow and stinging spray. It was March 31, 1779, the ship and its crew were fighting for their lives, having been driven off course by the elements.

No friendly beacon appeared to warn the vessel of the direction or proximity of the shoreline at Egg Harbor, or of the treacherous reefs but a mile off-shore. At 5 a.m. the ship crashed on the coast, its masts and rigging collapsing. Vicious waves swept the decks, washing men to their death.

Thirty-one hours later, rescuers managed to reach the remains of the strand-

ed wreck and save forty-two men still clinging to debris. Dead or missing were 145 soldiers and crew . . . history does not relate the number that eventually succumbed due to shock or hypothermia.

The *Mermaid* wasn't the first vessel to perish along the New Jersey coast, nor would it be the last. But it was typical of the hundreds of craft which met a similar fate along a coastline infamous for its dearth of navigational signals. The Egg Harbor area, specifically the Brigantine and Absecon beaches, could grimly boast more than their share of ship disasters.



# Absecon Lighthouse

By Jack Boucher

Dr. Jonathan Pitney, who would one day be called the Father of Atlantic City, was acutely aware of the danger to mariners which existed along the beaches he regarded as otherwise beneficent. In 1820 this former country physician arrived in the Absecon area. He encouraged his patients and friends to take vacations in the area. By 1830 he had witnessed enough ship wrecks to realize a lighthouse was needed to assist the mariner. He began to petition for the beacon, and for the next 20 years his letters to the government fell on deaf ears. However, there were many areas of our growing nation crying out for lighthouses. Between 1820 and 1850 the number of aids to navigation in this country increased from 55 lighthouses and a handful of buoys to 325 lighthouses and lightships and numerous buoys, minor beacons and other aids. In fairness to the government, it wasn't as if the New Jersey coast was being ignored. The Sandy Hook lighthouse had been established in 1764; the Sandy Hook lightship station and the Cape May lighthouse in 1823; the Navesink twin towers in 1828; the Five Fathom Bank lightship station in 1839; and the Tucker Beach station in 1849. It was a matter of priorities.

But the area did need a lighthouse to aid commerce as evidenced by the schooners *Louisa*, *Ann*, *Nile*, *Duroc* and the ships *George Cannon*, *Franfort* and *Ghengis Khan* closing their log books between Great and Little Egg harbors during this period.

Early in the 1840's the Lighthouse Service received instructions to survey the Absecon Beach to determine the need for a lighthouse. Congress appropriated \$5,000 on the condition that a satisfactory report be received, a token gesture probably designed to placate the crusading Dr. Jonathan Pitney.

Commodore La Vallette was in charge of the feasibility project and after surveying the area and examining the voluminous records prepared by Pitney, turned down the lighthouse request. Between 1847 and 1856, 64 more ships foundered on Absecon beach, with more lost north and south of that area.

Why the government opposed construction of a lighthouse in an area so frequently the scene of ship wrecks is a moot point. Carnesworthe, in his 1868 "History of Atlantic City" states Pitney "... had to fight prejudice, and especially prejudice against improvements, that at the time reigned supreme among the 'grannies' of the [government]." Apparently even eleven years after the lighthouse was constructed, there was a trace of bitterness over the battle which established the structure.

In April of 1846, the state of New Jersey passed a resolution which read: "Whereas, the erection of a lighthouse on Tucker's Beach, or Absecombe Beach as the commissioners may think most eligible, would greatly promote the safety of vessels navigating the Atlantic Coast, and thereby conduce to the interest of navigation and commerce; and Whereas an application from the citizens of this state for an appropriation for such object is now before Congress: Therefore 1. RESOLVED, by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey, That our Senators and Representatives in Congress be requested to use their influence to obtain a sufficient appropriation for the purpose of constructing a light house as aforesaid. 2. RESOLVED, That the Governor of this state be requested to forward to each of our Sen-



The Absecon Light Station in 1909. The station encompasses an entire city block. The head keeper's house is at left, with a connecting passage to the tower. Until about 1908 the keeper's house had three stories (see photo on page 7). The assistant quarters is at right. National Archives photo courtesy of Keeper Robert Lewis.



ators and Representatives a copy of these resolutions.”

The joint resolution was signed and approved by Governor Charles Stratton. However, action on the Federal level was not forthcoming and again the proposed “Absecon Lighthouse” construction was put on the shelf.

One of the most disastrous shipwrecks occurred April 16, 1854, when the ship *Powhatan* carrying 311 immigrants plus the crew, beached two miles above Little Egg Harbor, with no survivors. This would have been within view of the Absecon Lighthouse had it existed. Perhaps the light would have allowed the master of the *Powhatan* to avoid the disaster. The names of vessels which came to grief on the shores of New Jersey within sight of the eventual location of the Absecon Lighthouse is too long to list.

Pitney again agitated for what had easily become his pet project. He wrote Congressmen, gathered petitions, and published articles. Finally, in 1854 his efforts came to fruition. The Lighthouse Service requested, and received, funds from Congress. Convinced by Pitney's logic and the increasing reports of shipping losses as coastal trade increased, \$35,000 was appropriated. Two years later an additional \$17,000 was added to complete the project.

The original location was situated 700 feet from mean high water. The engineer in charge was Maj. Hartman Bache, who had a long relationship with the Lighthouse Service. He surveyed the locations for the first eight west coast lighthouses around 1850. Bache was replaced by Lt. George Meade shortly after construction started and the project was completed by Lt. Col. William F. Reynolds. All were members of the Army Corps of Engineers. The deed dated December 5, 1854, from the Camden & Atlantic Land Company transferred the site to the U.S. Government for \$520.

Construction of the station proceeded without a hitch and on January 15, 1857 the Funck's mineral oil lamp was lighted and the 1st order Fresnel lens flashed its white light 18 to 20 miles out to sea.

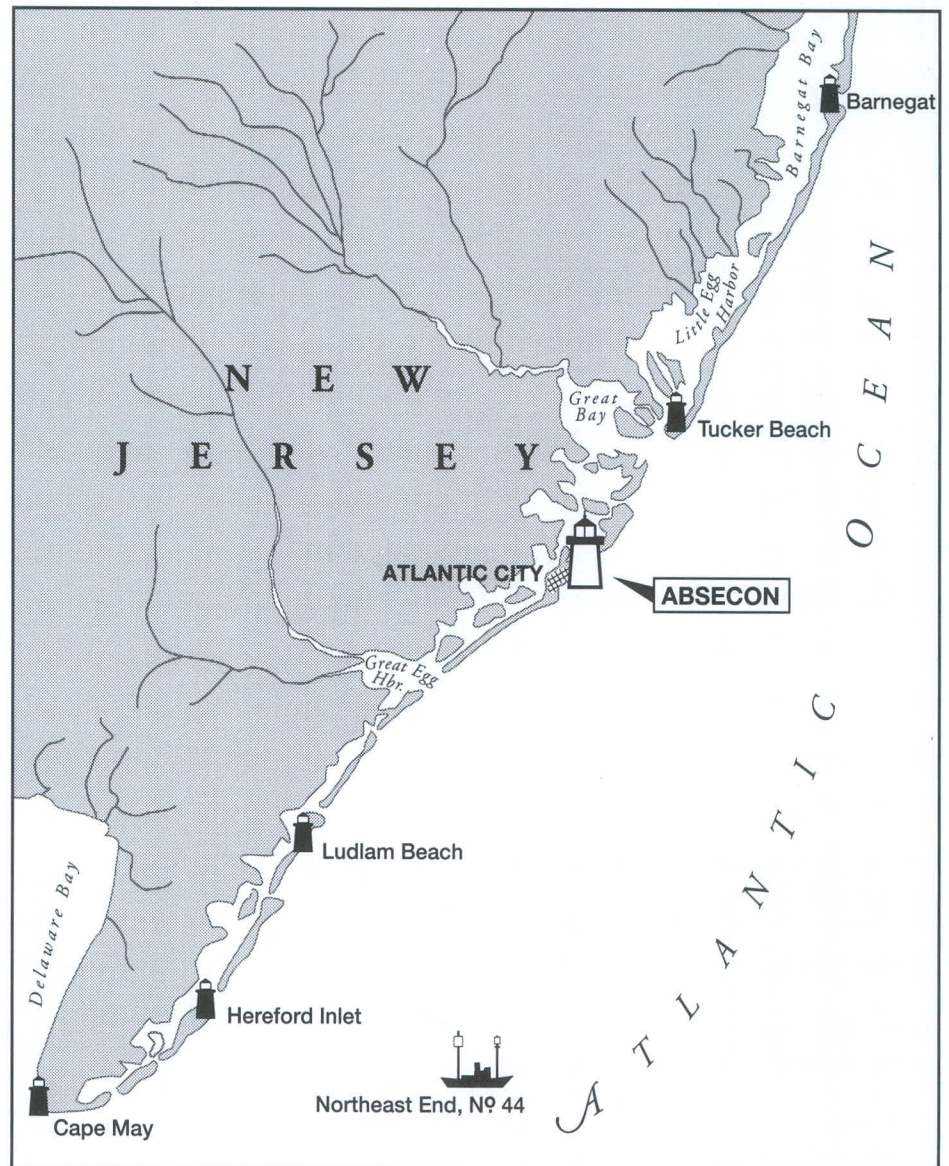
The tower is 170 feet high and 598,634 bricks were used in its construction. The spiral iron staircase has 228 steps. The tower tapers from a bottom diameter of 26' 4" to 12' at the top.

The finished station consisted of the tower, two keeper's dwellings (one a duplex), outhouses, oil house, small barn, and quite unusual for a light station, a greenhouse. For many years the government employed a laborer to take care of the two acres of grounds, plant flowers, and perform additional caretaker duties.

Over the years, the shoreline at Absecon receded until the station was surrounded by water during storms, at high tide. By 1876 the shore line was within 75 feet of the sta-

tion and the tower appeared to be seriously threatened. One contractor proposed moving the tower and buildings further inland, but the situation was solved by the construction of several jetties extending from shore into the water. Sand beaches began rebuilding themselves as the ocean deposited sand to the leeward side of the jetties. By the mid 1880's the jetties were covered by broad sand beaches, the shore line had returned to its 1854 configuration, and residents began constructing homes, shops and a modest boardwalk.

The Absecon tower remained unpainted until August 14, 1871 when three 50 foot wide bands were added to give the tower a distinctive white, red, white design. When repainted in 1897, the colors were changed to yellow, black







The Absecon Light Station and Life Saving Station, circa 1876. The building at far left is the Senate, a resort hotel. The small building behind the fence, in front of the lighthouse, may be a boathouse for the light station. The tower of the Life Saving Service Station is one of the earliest designs incorporating an enclosed lookout room. Photo courtesy of the Atlantic County Historical Society.



kand yellow bands. This color scheme remained until 1948 when the present white, blue, white scheme was applied.

The initial mineral oil (kerosene) lamps gave way to i.o.v. [incandescent oil vapor] lamps in 1910 and that to electricity in 1925. The first keeper, Daniel Scull, was appointed November 25, 1856 and he was paid \$600 a year. His two assistants received \$520 and \$340 a year.

As the end of the century approached, Atlantic City had become a major tourist site and the Absecon Lighthouse a major attraction. In 1912 over 10,000 people signed the station visitor's log, and this popularity continued into the 1950's.

As Atlantic City grew and more large buildings were constructed it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the lighthouse light from the glare of the city. One might consider the city itself an aid to navigation. In 1933, the station was deactivated and came perilously close to succumbing to the wrecker's ball.

During Atlantic City's centennial in 1954, the lens was lighted for a brief period, but the tower remained closed to visitors.

By 1963, the tower had gained historic significance. The author was appointed by the Atlantic City Park department to oversee the restoration of the tower; the ancillary buildings had long since been removed. Finally at a ceremony kicking off New Jersey's Tercentenary Celebration, Governor Richard Hughes pressed a button in the state house which was transmitted to the tower, relighting the lens for the first time in 25 years. Since that occasion a small cadre of people have opened the tower to the public from time to time. The tower may be visited by calling Bob Preston at (609) 345-5551.

The author, Jack Boucher, is Supervisor of the Architectural Photographic Documentation section of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). Jack, who grew up in Atlantic City, has long had a love affair with the Absecon Lighthouse, so much so that he proposed to his lovely wife Peggy in the tower, a year after he met her at the relighting ceremony.



Above – Abraham G. Wolf was appointed keeper of the Absecon Light Station in 1875, where he served about 25 years. He was in the local Masonic and Elk orders of the community. Born in 1839, he died in the Elk's Home in 1912, aged 73 years. Photo courtesy of the Atlantic County Historical Society.

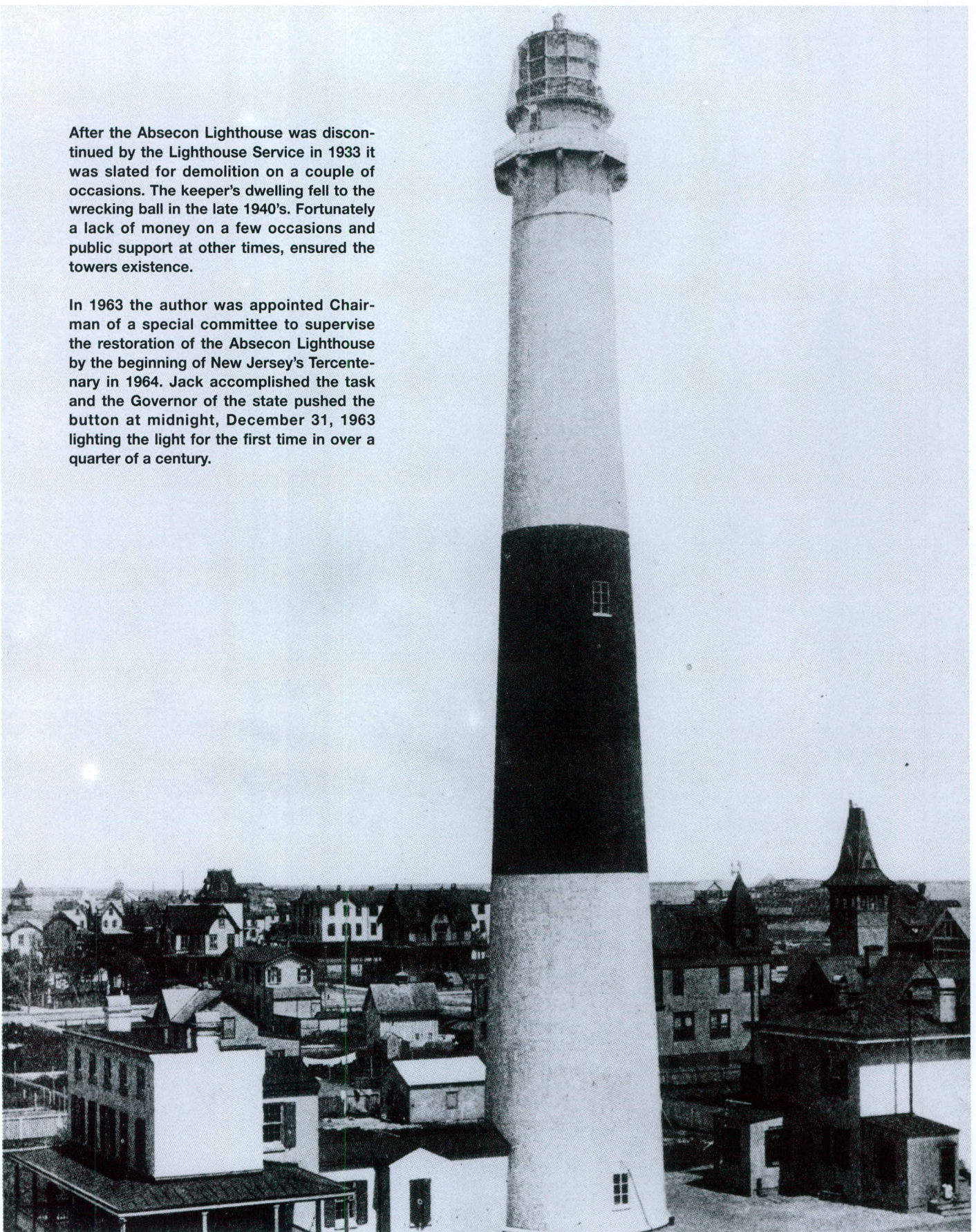


Keeper Knaud Hansen took great pride in cultivating Hydrangeas, shown here. He was delighted to show them to all visitors and many told him that they were the finest in the United States. Photo courtesy of the Atlantic County Historical Society.



After the Absecon Lighthouse was discontinued by the Lighthouse Service in 1933 it was slated for demolition on a couple of occasions. The keeper's dwelling fell to the wrecking ball in the late 1940's. Fortunately a lack of money on a few occasions and public support at other times, ensured the tower's existence.

In 1963 the author was appointed Chairman of a special committee to supervise the restoration of the Absecon Lighthouse by the beginning of New Jersey's Tercentenary in 1964. Jack accomplished the task and the Governor of the state pushed the button at midnight, December 31, 1963 lighting the light for the first time in over a quarter of a century.

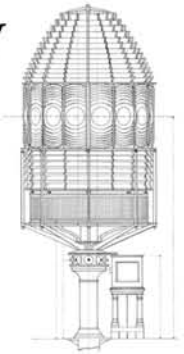


The Absecon Lighthouse circa 1907. Note the tower of the Life Saving Service Station at right, the next highest structure. Note that the third story of the keeper's house (left) was removed by 1909 (page 3). A National Archives photo courtesy of Keeper Robert Lewis.





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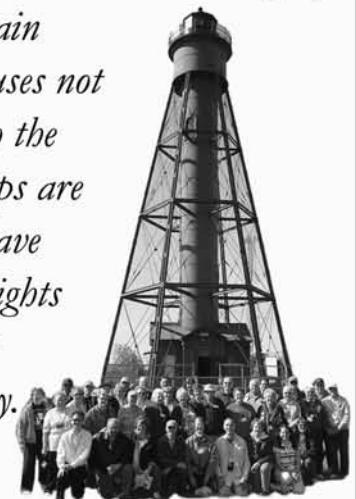
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