

Cape Henlopen Beacon Light

By Wayne Wheeler



uring the early years, the beacon light was referred to as the Cape Henlopen Lower Light. Later it was called a range and harbor light. Initially the rubble stone tower was about 45 feet high. No dwelling was associated with the beacon as Stephen Pleasonton, the fifth auditor of the Treasury in charge of our system at the time, felt that the service could save on expenses by having the keeper of the main light tend both aids. That decision meant that the keeper had to make at least three 1.5-mile treks through the sand each day: to light up at sunset, to check the wicks during the night, and to extinguish at dawn.

The following excerpt is from an inspection report submitted on June 25, 1851, by the local superintendent, C. Polk, outlining the poor condition of the beacon:

. . . No repairs for two years, everything in a wretched condition, threatened by being carried away by the sand, woodwork inside rotting and going fast; whole establishment in wretched condition, and if not repaired soon will become unfit for use; no curtains up [in the lantern room], keeper complains very much of not being supplied with necessary articles to enable him to keep his light in order. No dripping pans to tanks, tanks not marked except by chalk, repairs made by direction of Mr. Middleton, last year, who gave it out for a fixed sum, and never came to see if it was properly executed.

This unfortunate situation continued until 1854 after the new Lighthouse Board assumed control. In that year, a new fourth-order (270 degrees), fixed Fresnel lens re-

placed the antiquated reflector system and a keeper was appointed to manage the aid. The service constructed a small dwelling and storage shed alongside the tower.

1864 Annual Report to Congress from the U.S. Lighthouse Board: "Congress at its last session appropriated \$17,500 for rebuilding the beacon-light at Cape Henlopen, the old site being unsuitable by reason of the beach at that place having been made out some 400 yards since 1842. Vigorous measures being made to complete the work at the earliest practicable day have been taken, and it is now making good progress."

1865 Annual Report: "Under authority of Congress a new beacon-light required at Cape Henlopen, in place of the old structure, in consequence of the change of the shoreline, has been erected. The new beacon-light is a screw-pile structure, built near



Cape Henlopen Beacon Light (constructed in 1825) in May 1863 shortly before it was torn down. Note the old-style lantern room with small panes and antiquated vent. A storage shed is next to the tower and the dwelling to the left. Note numerous ships in the background, possibly blockading the entrance to Delaware Bay. National Archives photo.

the point of the Cape.” Some of the materials of the old tower were used to protect the site of the new structure (rip-rap) and the remainder sold at public auction.

1867 Annual Report: “The building is now being painted inside and out. The steps leading from the platform to the surface of the soil were last season carried away by storm tides. They have been renewed and arranged to be hoisted up.”

Over the ensuing years, the *Annual Reports* continued to mention needed repairs to the beacon light. Being located at the end of the spit of land of Cape Henlopen, it was constantly lashed by strong winds and battered by heavy seas and high tides. In 1876 a brick fog signal building was erected next to the beacon and duplicate steam-siren fog signals were installed. The *Annual Report* stated the fog signal was “. . . affording an important additional aid to vessels entering Delaware Bay in foggy weather.” Three years later (1879), the lighthouse structure was enlarged to accommodate an additional keeper to help operate the fog signal. However, two keepers proved inadequate, and a year later the board reported, “. . . An addition of two rooms, each 14 feet square, was

rendered necessary by the appointment of another keeper, who is to operate the new steam-siren at this station. These were built together with a gallery around it, and storm doors were furnished. The east side of the dwelling was shingled to give it better protection against easterly storms.”

Constant battering of the elements were spelling doom for the Cape Henlopen beacon. Every *Annual Report* mentions damage and repairs, and problems with the well that is necessary for the steam fog signal operation. The final nail in its coffin occurred when the bark *Minnie Hunter* came ashore about 550 feet north of the lighthouse.

1883 Annual Report: “The steps leading from the beach to the platform have been torn away and carried to sea in a storm, they were replaced by new ones hung on hinges, and the necessary tackle was supplied with which to raise them above the platform in case of necessity . . . the sea encroached upon the ocean side of the station until the high water line came under the lighthouse, and the question of the protection of the structure came under consideration.” The report mentioned the alteration of the beach around the station and blamed it on

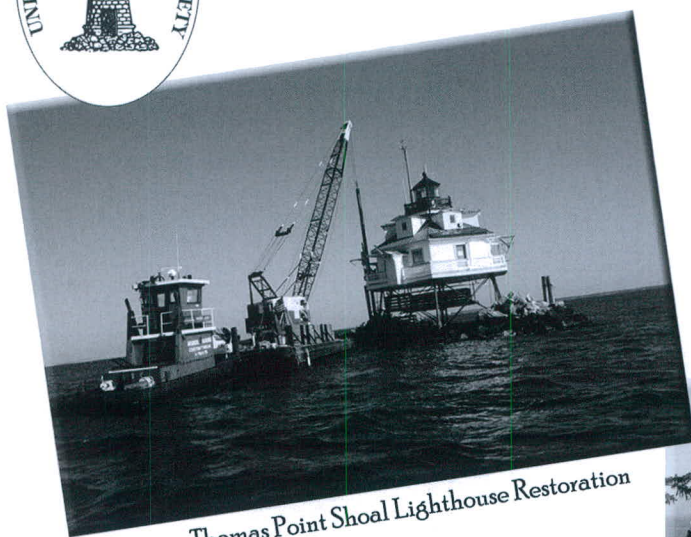
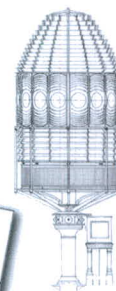
the wreck of the *Minnie Hunter*. “. . . This change was doubtless occasioned by the wreck acting as a jetty [causing the sand to accrete].” The following year the board mentioned that there was a plan to place a light on the south end of the Delaware Breakwater allowing the present beacon to be discontinued. “The station is in good order, but cannot be considered as safe, as a single long violent storm might throw down the beacon.”

1885 Annual Report: Cape Henlopen beacon—“On the northern end of the cape, about a mile from the main light, Delaware—This beacon having become unsafe from the undermining of its screw-pile foundation, the light was, on October 1, 1884, discontinued, and the beacon, with the exception of the piles was removed. A shanty for the keeper of the fog signal was put up near the fog signal house, and the material from the torn down beacon, not used for the shanty, was stored in its vicinity.”



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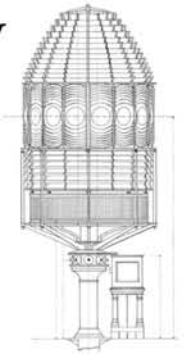
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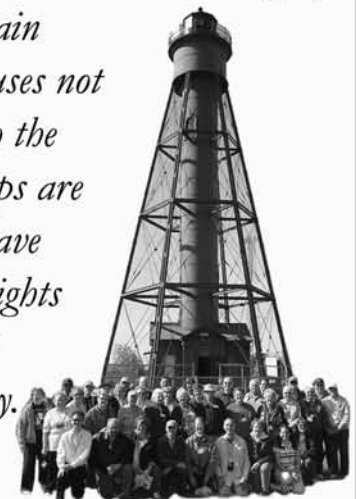
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