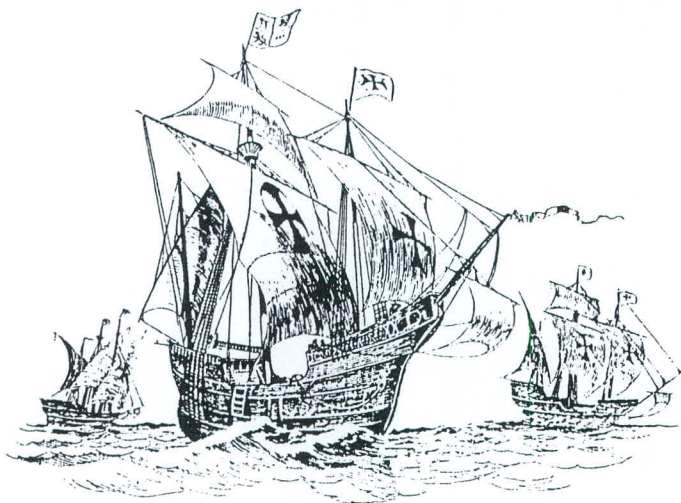


Columbus Memorial Lighthouse

By John D. Thomas



OCTOBER 12, 1992



day of great celebration in many parts of the world. There will be parades of ships, and there will be parades of people where there is no water. In cities

bearing the name "Columbus," and in cities with a large population of Italian ancestry there will be banners, costumes, music, speeches and spectacular nighttime fireworks. The plans are set for a festive Columbus Day, 1992, the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.

The grandest celebration of all will take place that day in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, when the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse (called the Faro a Colón) is formally dedicated. The struggle to build the memorial lighthouse covers a period of 140 years (beginning in 1852), and is replete with intrigue, misinformation, disappointment and very rare moments of enthusiasm.

The actual discovery of America, some immediate and subsequent events, and the struggle to build the memorial lighthouse are interesting stories and worthy of our consideration.

Perhaps the first history lesson taught to schoolchildren is the story of the discovery of America. Unfortunately, many youngsters become confused, simply because they are told, "Columbus discovered America in 1492." They may have visions of the Great Navigator sailing his three little ships to the shores of what is now New York, New Jersey or Maryland. They may not grasp the concept that "America" includes *all* of the countries of North, Central and South America (and that these were all lands populated by indigenous people).

Actually, the Dominican Republic was not the first land discovered by Columbus. He made his first landfall on October 12, 1492 in the Bahamas, which he called "San Salvador." Columbus gave names to virtually every piece of land and landmark he observed, although he was completely ignorant of the fact that he had discovered the "new world." Following the landing in the Bahamas, Columbus sailed on to Cuba. His third stop was an island he called "Hispaniola," now known as the Dominican Republic. There he left about thirty members of his crew and

established a settlement he called "Navi-did." He then set sail for Spain.

During the second voyage of Columbus (1493 to 1496) he discovered Puerto Rico and Jamaica. When he finally returned to "Hispaniola," (the Dominican Republic), he was in serious trouble because of his iron rule of the small group of Spaniards who had settled in the new country. In 1489, he was replaced as the Royal Commissioner of the country, and ordered back to Spain in chains. He made one final trip to the Americas (1502 to 1504) during which he explored the coast of Central America. He returned to Spain where he died in poverty and neglect. He had not delivered on his promises of great quantities of gold and other valuables to be delivered "from the East" to Spain.

For many years, Havana, Seville, Cuba and Santo Domingo each claimed to possess the remains of Columbus. Today historians seem to agree that parts of the remains are both in Seville and Santo Domingo. There are many stories about how the remains left Spain. Santo Domingo eventually emerged with the strongest claim of possession which they

aggressively announced to the world. This marked the beginning of plans for a large memorial to be erected in Santo Domingo to honor the Great Navigator. Quickly a memorial crypt was constructed within the city's cathedral. This installation was officially designated the burial site of Columbus.

Almost immediately the political leaders of the Dominican Republic decided that the memorial was not adequate. They stated that the only suitable memorial would be a lighthouse.

To digress a moment, there have been earlier utilitarian lighthouses in the Dominican Republic. For example an 1854 issue of *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, published in Boston, announced the completion of a "Dominican Iron Lighthouse," stating that, "The cast-iron lighthouse was constructed by order of the President of the Republic, and placed at the mouth of the Ozama River. The tower measures seventy-five feet from the base to the top of the lantern and is about seventeen feet in diameter."

Due to its unique design and construction, the cast-iron lighthouse was reported to be, "A most perfect work of strength throughout the whole structure, both perpendicular and horizontal. The simplicity of the tower is such that it may be put together by an ordinary mechanic, with no other apparatus for its erection than a derrick and a wrench."

The lighthouse was placed on a rocky ridge. It was anchored by means of wrought iron shafts underneath each column. These shafts were sunk into the rock in holes drilled eight to ten feet in depth. Of special note in the news account of the cast-iron lighthouse is the statement, "The size, shape and weight of the castings render them easy for transportation, and convenient for ship ballast." This was prophetic, as the lighthouse was moved to Port Plata in 1879.



THE STRUGGLE TO BUILD A SUITABLE MEMORIAL TO COLUMBUS

Returning to the story of the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse to be dedicated this year, it was in 1852 (140 years ago) when Don Antonio del Monto y Tejada had the honor of presenting the first proposal for a memorial lighthouse. In very elegant language, a proclamation was issued by the government of the Dominican Republic for all nations in the Americas to support the effort. Initial consideration was given to erection of a giant-sized statue, "In the most visible and notable place in America. Let this statue be a colossus like that in Rhodes." Following numerous and lengthy speeches and debates, the proclamation was amended with the addition of this statement, "In order that this symbol may carry within itself all the attributes of perpetuity, let there be established in it a lighthouse." This is probably the only time in history a suggestion was made to locate a lighthouse within a statue.

Nothing further was accomplished and the recommendation remained dormant for thirty years, until 1882. At that time attention turned to the erection of a tomb worthy of holding the remains of Columbus. A special tax was promptly levied and funds were collected. The

"new" tomb was to be temporarily housed in the cathedral until it could be moved to, "... an appropriate structure crowned by a lighthouse." With that plan in mind, a special commission purchased land in the western part of the city of Santo Domingo. However, due to public discontent, the tax was repealed and thus funds were not available for the construction of the combined tomb and lighthouse.

Another forty years went by without memorial lighthouse activity. Suddenly, at the 1923 meeting of the Fifth International Conference of American States, it was unanimously resolved that a proper memorial would be erected and financially supported by the countries of the Americas. Eloquent pleas were made by the Dominican Republic's representative at the conference. The United States representative, Henry P. Fletcher, indicated the strong support of the United States government. In 1927, the Congress of the United States ratified the action of the International Conference and added, "The people of the United States will participate in this movement to honor the memory of the Great Navigator." However, promised financial support was never forthcoming.

In 1927, the Pan American Union, headquartered in Washington, D.C., went on record as supporting the project. One more committee was established, this time to study the means of implementing the proposal that a lighthouse be erected as the focal point of a suitable memorial to Columbus. It was further resolved by the Pan American Union's Board of Governors that, "The Government and peoples of all nations of the world would be permitted to participate in the tribute to this memory of the Discoverer." An architectural competition was announced as being open to representatives of all nations.

Architect Albert Kelsey, F.A.I.A., Technical Advisory and member of the Pan American Union, was appointed to serve as coordinator in making the announcement of the competition and publicizing its rules throughout the world (Kelsey was one of the architects of the Pan American building in New York).

In 1927, Kelsey went to the Dominican Republic to write the program and draw up the contest rules. Specific guidelines were established, including provisions for a one mile aircraft landing strip and a gigantic aircraft hangar adjoining the memorial lighthouse. A large volume entitled *Program and Rules of the Competition for the Selection of an Architect for the MEMORIAL LIGHTHOUSE Which Nations of the World Will Erect in the Dominican Republic to the Memory of Christopher Columbus*, was published in 1928.

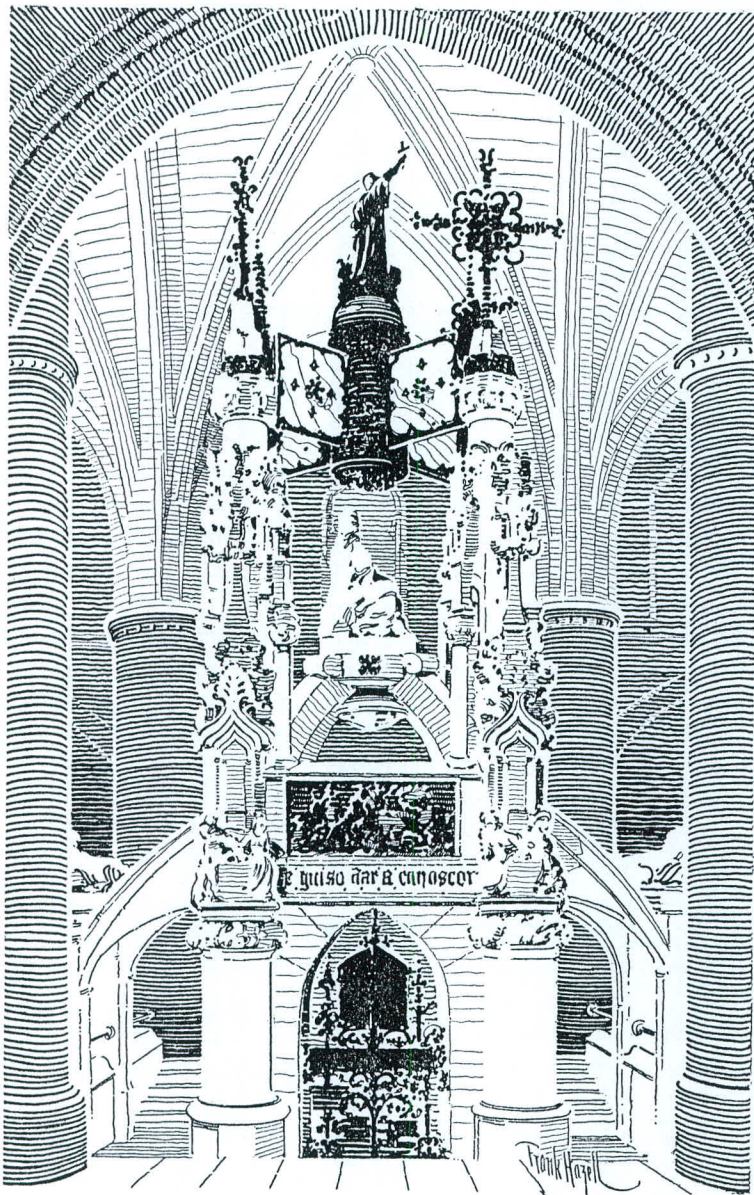
More than half of the material in the large hardcover volume of "Programs and Rules" consists of very personal impressions and remarks by author Kelsey. There are sentimental comments covering every aspect of the lives of the citizens of the country. Kelsey did not overlook a single detail in his "loving" report on the romantic and relaxed lifestyles of the country. Glowing and gushing statements were made about the great beauty of the children, music, dancing, livestock, flora and fauna, vistas, and even a most impressive notation that, "There are no snakes in the Dominican Republic."

Several brief quotations from the Kelsey volume are of interest:

"The artist must seek a universal view point. His vision must include five centuries of world history in which the discovery of America is the most transcendental fact. He must adjust his conception of the ample proportions of the picture of that historical epoch, in which stand forth in high relief the Renaissance, the civilization of the Spain of Isabella, the three American civilizations, native, colonial, and modern, the transference of the classic routes of commerce from the inland Mediterranean to the limitless Atlantic and Pacific, and the influence of the New World in the ideological, economic and political orientation of western civilization."

Kelsey then turned to specific instructions and suggestions for the competing architects, adding:

"So you are urged not to draw a



The Tomb of Christopher Columbus in the Cathedral

line without thinking of peculiar climatic conditions — without bearing in mind that this memorial is to stand in the tropics; and that the tropics are those two circles around the globe, to the north and to the south of the Equator, that are the most fertile and the most brilliant regions on earth."

Kelsey concludes his instructions with the statement:

"Thus the architecture of the Columbus Light must above all be rugged to withstand possible hurricanes and earthquakes, and likewise strong in color to absorb the black shadows, and especially in order to be seen from a great distance under every changing atmospheric condition."

DREAMS VERSUS THE REALITY OF THE LIGHTHOUSE STANDING TODAY

A short historical overview will help us understand the differences in the Memorial Lighthouse and aspirations stated so eloquently approximately seventy years ago.

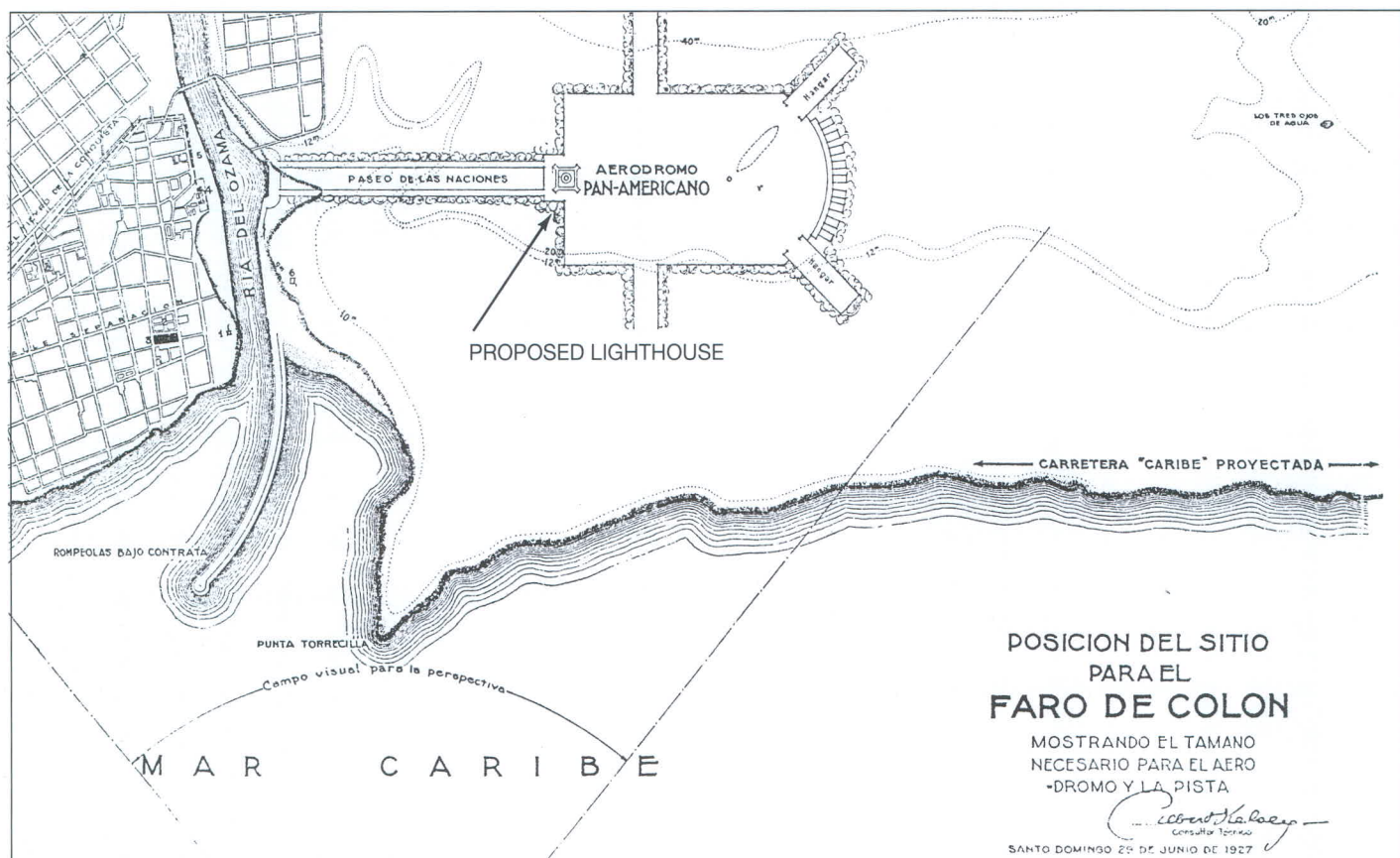
Over the past five hundred years, the Dominican Republic has undergone a number of political changes. The country was occupied by Spain and later by France and England. Haiti shares a portion of the same island with the Dominican Republic, and hostilities still exist between the two countries. The citizens of the black republic of Haiti were determined to stamp out the slavery imposed upon their people captured and placed in servitude in the Dominican Republic. In 1822, the Haitian army occupied Santo Domingo and took over the control and administration of the entire island. Ultimately, the Dominican Republic fought back and on February 27, 1844, they proclaimed victory and declared the establishment of the independent Dominican Republic.

Over the centuries, the republic has been a country desired by other nations

as a possession. The United States played a role in this intrigue, to the point of an actual military presence on the island. From 1850 to 1874, the United States was weighing a plan to either rent or annex a portion of the republic (the Samana Peninsula), and establish a permanent naval base in that location. Secretary of State William H. Seward, who had negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia, was pushing for annexation. The U.S. Congress rejected the plan. The Dominican Republic then refused to rent a portion of the country.

The United States Marines occupied the republic from 1916 to 1924, when the country was threatened by civil war. As late as 1965, President Lyndon Johnson sent an occupying force to the island when fighting appeared about to spread throughout the country.

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo held dictatorial power from 1930 to 1961. The effects of Trujillo's harsh and brutal rule are felt in the country even today. Changes in government and turmoil existed within the country until 1966,



The original lighthouse reservation proposed for Santo Domingo. Note the large landing strip and two hangars for dirigibles.

when elections were again held. Although elected, Presidents of the Dominican Republic rule by decree. This is the situation today, with Dr. Joaquin Balaguer serving as President. Balaguer's first term as President concluded in 1978. He left office, but returned to power in 1990 following a questionable election. Balaguer has always been dedicated to a program of construction — as opposed to programs enhancing the health and welfare of the nation's citizens. Foremost was his plan (some observers have called it his obsession) to build a huge lighthouse. The plans of 1928 and later had faded away. Monies promised from various nations failed to appear. President Balaguer determined that his country would "go it alone" and complete construction of the great lighthouse.

Returning briefly to the architectural competition of 1928, it is interesting to note that in 1931, an international architectural jury met in Madrid to review and evaluate four hundred and fifty entries. Designated as the recipient of the \$10,000 prize was a young English architect, J.L. Gleve. He was a student-architect and submitted only artist's drawings.

Gleve's concept included adjoining facilities to the lighthouse. These were to be museums, galleries and other noble spaces. The idea of an adjoining structure was utilized in the present memorial. In addition, Gleve's plan for a final resting place for the lead casket containing what are believed to be the remains of Columbus, was included in the present construction.

In spite of the technical challenges and hardships imposed upon the public, construction of the Memorial Lighthouse has been completed. Some fifty thousand citizens were forced from their homes to make room for the giant memorial. Misery and hunger were not the primary concerns of President Balaguer. In the technical area there were problems. For example, electricity is so scarce (the electrical system of the country is bankrupt) that it is available only four out of every twenty-four hours. Of necessity, a generator has been installed

in the Memorial Lighthouse.

Following the 140 years of argument, abandonment, and finally resolution, a lighthouse now dominates the sky over Santo Domingo.

Depending upon one's source of information, the cost of construction is estimated from \$20 million to \$100 million, a tidy sum for a lighthouse. The President of the Republic will not state the actual cost because of the shock such a revelation would be in a country rated as one of the most financially distressed nations in the world. The "Faro a Colon" sits atop a giant building which includes a new Presidential palace.

The new lighthouse will certainly light up the sky when the switch is pulled on October 12, 1992. The beacon will project a lighted cross on the sky which will be visible as far away as Puerto Rico, two hundred miles to the east. The 147 giant beams of light will reach some 3,000 feet into the Caribbean night.

Observers report that the lighthouse is mounted on what appears to be a fat concrete pyramid, with an extended arm. It has a giant humped look; a big unmovable bulk of dull greyness. Because of an outcry of criticism on two

major points — (1) the obscene expense of the construction, and (2) the current controversy surrounding the moral issues of the Columbus expeditions — the Dominican Republic has not readily responded to requests for detailed information concerning the lighthouse. In the United States it is virtually impossible, at this time, to obtain photos of the lighthouse and its mammoth building.

After 140 years of planning and struggle, there stands a lighthouse, one perhaps a mere handful of people want. Yet, big plans have been made for the dedication ceremony of October 12th. President Balaguer will pull the switch in the company of such world luminaries as Pope John Paul II, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain, and perhaps Vice President Quayle will make a brief visit to the country to represent the United States.

All of the glitter and ceremony will be recorded on camera and can result in video sales for years to come. Hundreds of souvenirs can be created. The marketing potential is unlimited.

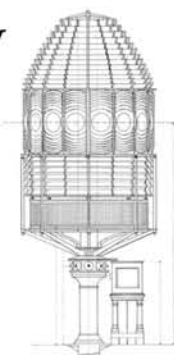
There is one final bit of irony to all of this. President Ballaguer is 84-years-old and blind. The question remains as to what he will not be able to see — is it really a lighthouse?



Despite many calls to the Dominican Republic Embassy we were unable to obtain photos of the completed Columbus Lighthouse. The above photo is the only visual we have of the finished structure. It was taken by an unidentified Society member.



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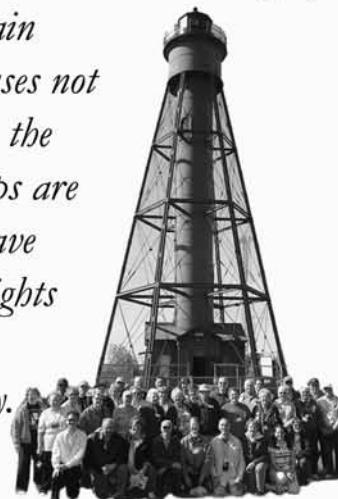
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