

Private Aids to Navigation

By Wayne Wheeler

It's probably a surprise to members, but there are far more private aids to navigation in U.S. waters than government aids. Today the Coast Guard maintains about 35,000 aids to navigation. They include lights, sound (fog) signals, daymarks, LORAN and OMEGA (electronic) stations and lighted and unlighted buoys. At the same time there are approximately 50,000 private aids to navigation. Private aids are established and maintained by oil companies (Gulf of Mexico drilling platforms) harbor districts, marinas, yacht clubs, other government entities (Navy, cities) and private citizens who wish to light their dock or, in some case, who have built their own "lighthouse" and wish to show a light from the lantern room. The largest single collection of private aids to navigation is the 30,000 lights and sound signals marking the oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico.

Private aids are separated into three categories. Class I is a private aid that the Coast Guard requires to be maintained. This is often an aid to mark a recently sunken vessel or some other hazard to navigation such as a pier that extends into navigable waters. Class II aids are requested by harbors, yacht clubs, marinas, etc. that are in heavily traveled waterways. Class III is aids requested by individuals that are located off the beaten path.

Obtaining permission for a private aid to navigation is not a complicated matter. The approval is granted by the Aids to Navigation (ATON) branch of the Coast Guard district in which the aid will be established. A single sheet form is used to outline the type of aid and its intended characteristic. There is no cost involved. The primary purpose is that the Coast Guard wants to ensure that the characteristic of the aid is not similar to others in the area or would otherwise confuse the mariner.

Our government didn't have authority to regulate private aids to navigation until the passage of a Congressional Act on June 30, 1906.

During Colonial times harbor masters, shipping companies and private citizens established aids to navigation how and where they saw fit. There was no rhyme or reason to what aids were placed or where. Mariners, unfamiliar with an area, were often more confused by the seamarks they encountered than if there hadn't been any. The Blunts brother helped matters somewhat by annually publishing a guide to the waterways of America called *The Coast Pilot*. It provided, in detail, what a mariner might experience when he sailed along the coast, or into a harbor, river or estuary. The publication also made recommendations on how to safely navigate an area: bearings to take, best tide stages to traverse an area, where hazards were located, etc.

Our government didn't codify an aids to navigation system until mid-19th century. Even then, steamboat companies, local harbor masters and private citizens continued to place aids to navigation as they saw fit. The problem with these private aids was they were not uniform. They didn't emulate government standards. They were not published in newspapers or maritime journals; they were not properly maintained and sometimes they conflicted with government established aids. The government aids were listed in Light Lists, which gave detailed descriptions about each aid and location, and other information was printed on nautical charts. Any action to the aid to navigation – when established, when missing or when discontinued – the information was published in a federal publication called the *Notice to Mariners*, local newspapers and other public journals. Every attempt was made to notify the mariner of changes to the aids.

The Lighthouse Board made the following recommendation every year between 1883 and 1895 and again in 1904 and 05.

"The Board renews its recommendation that proper steps be taken to prohibit the establishment or maintenance of private lights and buoys in the navigable waters of the United States except with the consent of the board, and it again asks that provisions be made to enable it to establish inexpensive

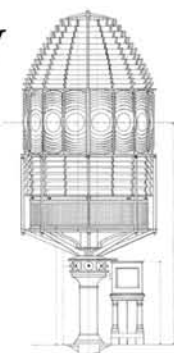
and temporary lights in cases of exigency and pending the action of Congress. In this connection the Board begs leave to repeat the recommendation it made in its annual report for 1883:

"Some action should be taken to the establishment of lights and buoys by steamboat companies and other private parties simply for their own convenience. The Board cannot establish a light without special authority of law in each case. It never exhibits a light without previously issuing a formal notice to mariners, and it never extinguishes one without giving similar notice sufficiently in advance to inform all concerned. Private lights are established and extinguished without such notice, much to the annoyance of the mariners, who are confused and misled by irregular beacons. Besides this, the lights, which are not properly kept, go out from time to time.

"One of the best examples of these private lights is that exhibited on Blackwells Island, by the municipality of New York City. It has gone out a number of times recently, and so much to the inconvenience, if not danger, of mariners that complaint has been made, and the Board has been subjected to unmerited criticism for failing to do what was alleged to be its duty, when in fact it has not the slightest control over that light. Under these circumstances the Board suggests that the exhibiting of lights or placing of buoys by corporations or private parties be prohibited by law. Lest any interest should suffer thereby it is further suggested that the Board, on being satisfied that it is immediately necessary to do so, be authorized to establish inexpensive temporary lights, if necessary on leased land, or to pay for their erection and maintenance, together with the cost to employ laborers to act as keepers, as is now done on the western rivers, from the general appropriations for the support of the Light-House Establishment, provided that funds can be spared from them for that purpose, and further provided that the Board shall make report of its action in each case, with the reason therefore, so that the congress may decide as to the continuance of each light."



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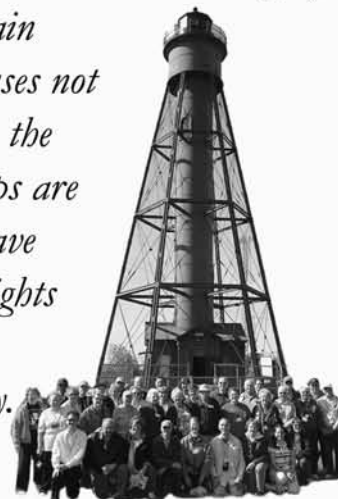
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