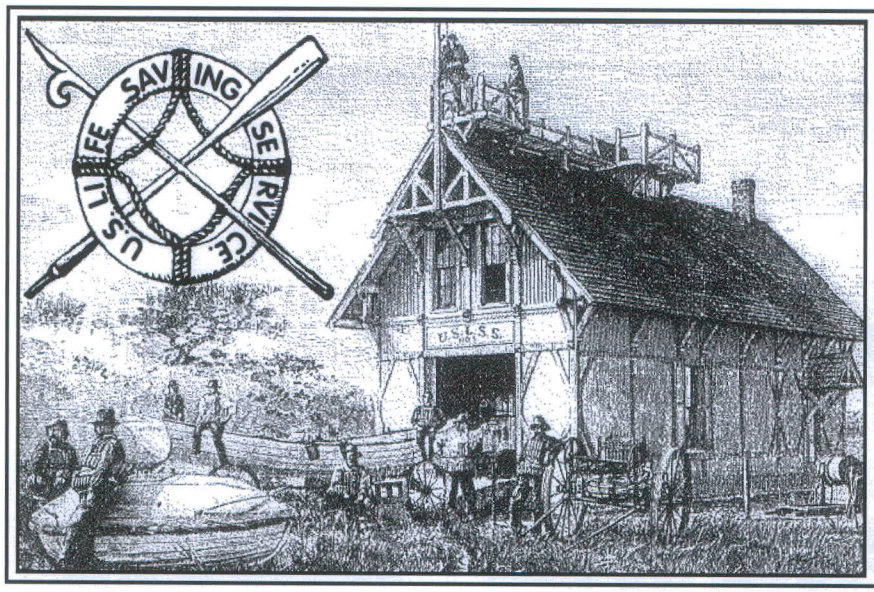
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

The Loss of the Brant Rock Life-Saving Station

by John J. Galluzzo

A vacant lot stands today where the Brant Rock Life-Saving Station once overlooked the sea, and from whence heroes once set out to patrol the Marshfield shore. That fate did not have to be the case for a building with such indelible history. Outright and blatant federal governmental inefficiency doomed the Brant Rock station from a future that may have included use as extra classroom space for the growing town, community meeting space, or even the first lifesaving museum in the region. Where once there was hope, today, there are nothing but stones and a battered stretch of low seawall, hardly reminders of what used to be.

The Coast Guard left the Brant Rock station shortly after World War II. Several factors led to the consolidation of the service along America's shores at this time. In fact, the changes that led to the closing of numerous stations around the United States had begun at the beginning of the twentieth century. New communications technologies had obviated the need for nightly beach patrols during peacetime, as radar and ship-to-shore radio combined to make the kerosene lantern-swinging sandpounder obsolete. They would remain during time of crises. Coast Guardsmen patrolling the beaches in the dark days of Prohibition stood as the first line of defense against rumrunners, and during World War II, they formed a thin oil-skinned line tasked with sounding the alarm when the expected German and Japanese invasions finally came. Motorized lifeboats, originally tested in Marquette, Michigan in 1899, lengthened the distances between stations; a crew with a motor lifeboat could respond to a shipwreck offshore in a shorter time from farther away than could a crew in a lifeboat powered only by oars. With new stations built in Sandwich and Scituate in the 1930s and the Point Allerton station still guarding the entrance to Boston Harbor, the ancient lifesaving stations at Fourth Cliff, Brant Rock, the Gurnet and Manoment Point lost their value, and one by one were pulled from operational status.



The Brant Rock Life-Saving Station had certainly seen better days by the 1950s. Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

The General Services Administration (GSA), the federal government's property disposal agency, announced the pending sale of the Brant Rock Coast Guard Station in November of 1953. The station at that time was still much like it was when it was built in 1893, save for several repairs made to it in 1919, and a remodeling in 1921 that brought heat, light and water to it for the first time (as well as a new well). Interest in using the old, but sturdy building for community purposes came immediately.

On November 23, 1953, Edward A. Martinson, superintendent of the Marshfield schools wrote to Thomas Peyton, Director of

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The men of the Brant Rock Life-Saving Station. Photo courtesy of Richard Boonisar.

Surplus Real Property, GSA, stating,

> The Town of Marshfield, Massachusetts is experiencing a tremendous population growth as a consequence of population movements from Boston proper to the metropolitan suburbs…While we are endeavoring to keep up with the growth by building new school buildings, it is almost impossible to keep right in step. Consequently we are seeking school housing space to tide us over the immediate period. We have learned that the Coast Guard station located in Brant Rock and known as the Brant Rock Coast Guard Station has been declared surplus property by the local Coast Guard office located in Boston. We are writing to you to learn of its availability for educational purposes as it appears that such matters clear through your office.

But, there was immediate confusion between the two branches of the federal government involved in the process of the property's disposal. The General Services Administration was not fully aware of the Coast Guard's intentions to release the Brant Rock station and land, or at least claimed to be. In an interagency letter, one GSA staffer informed another that the notification may have been lost in the northeast office's recent move from Boston to New York.

More importantly, though, when the letter from the Coast Guard to the GSA was found, the question of whether or not the federal government actually owned the land, or just the right to use it, had to be answered. Should the latter be the case, the government might have to begin a search for heirs to the land to determine their interest in reacquiring it. On January 13, 1954, J.J. O'Connor, regional director of the GSA, wrote to K.S. Harrison, the Coast Guard's chief counsel, saying,

> We are somewhat perplexed concerning the exact and precise status of the Government's interest, if any, in this parcel of land. We gather from the first page of your letter that it is your opinion that inasmuch as the term for the Government's use and occupancy is of such great length and indefiniteness that for all intents and purposes, the Government has a fee simple title. Yet the language on page 2 of your letter would seem to indicate that the Government's interest was not a fee simple absolute but merely a right to use and occupy for an indefinite period of time, and at the termination of which the Government property located thereon would be removed or sold to the present owner of the fee simple title. Inasmuch as we, acting as the Government's Disposal Agency, can sell no more than what the Government owns…In addition to the above, it has been informally brought to our attention that there may be an agreement currently outstanding whereby the Coast Guard agreed with its Grantor that the Government buildings would be removed from the premises within 45 days of the date of termination of the Government's use and occupancy of the premises. Any information you may have pertaining to this factor would be greatly appreciated. It is noted that no such time limit is included in the document dated June 20, 1891 which conveyed this property interest to the United States.

The Life-Saving Service had purchased the lot on which the Brant Rock Lifesaving Station stood on June 20, 1891 from Bradley Bryant of Boston for a cost of $600, using standard paperwork referring to the Act of 1875. That act enabled the service to buy land for the construction of lifesaving stations. The deed set the boundaries along the Atlantic Ocean and Brant Rock's famed Ocean Street, with additional stipulations that "no building shall be placed nearer than 17 feet to the ocean side of said lots nor nearer than 10 feet to the Ocean Avenue side, and no privy shall be placed upon said lots unless enclosed within and under the roof of some other building." The document was signed by Bryant, Lieutenant O.C. Hamlet, United States Revenue Cutter Service, acting on behalf of the Life-Saving Service, and General A.B. Nettleton, Acting Secretary of the Treasury. Sumner Increase Kimball, the General Superintendent of the Life-Saving Service later added his initials.

The question of governmental ownership stretched into 1955, when finally, on February 9, the GSA pulled the station from the list of properties available for disposal. That status changed again on May 26 when the government's General Counsel ruled that the government had indeed acquired fee simple title to the land in 1891. On June 29, the GSA sent a letter to several governmental agencies, including the Department of Agriculture, the Atomic Energy Commission, the Department of Commerce, the Federal Communications Commission, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the Housing and Home Finance Agency, the Department of the Interior, the Department of Justice, the

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Breeches buoy demonstrations at Brant Rock brought out the crowds as they did all along the coast. Photo courtesy of Historical Research Associates.

Post Office and the Veterans Administration to assess their level of interest, if any, in acquiring the building. To reach this point, the GSA had already determined that the Coast Guard and the Department of Defense had found no use of the station for national defense.

In October, 1955, the GSA sent another letter, this one to Superintendent Martinson, asking if his interest still held in using the main building for the town's educational purposes. On November 15, two years after the station had originally been declared surplus, Marshfield Selectman Harold H. Wicher wrote to the regional director of the GSA to state that if the schools weren't interested in taking over the site, the greater Town of Marshfield certainly would be. The GSA sent a second letter to Martinson, to which he responded on November 28 that yes, the Town would be interested in using the building for summer school programs, but that all future correspondence should go through the office of the selectmen, as they were the only government officials legally allowed to make property purchases for the community.

Wicher traded letters with the GSA, excitedly asking about potential uses for the station, including as an education site and for public use as a gateway to the beach. The GSA explained that if the town planned to use the town as a public park in any way, they would have to gain National Park Service approval for those plans, live with "certain restrictions imposed," but be aware that they could make the purchase at 50% of the assessed fair market value; should they choose to use it for education, the station would first be passed to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for ultimate transfer to the Town of Marshfield. On December 15, the town requested of the GSA that fair market value be assessed.

By the end of the calendar year, the list of individuals interested in purchasing the station at public auction had grown to several dozen, including G.E. Carlson, of Miami, Florida; Henry G. Doyle, of Washington, D.C.; Thomas Mangravite, acting on behalf of Bell Telephone Laboratories in New York; Charles Runyan, also of Washington, D.C.; A.J. MacEachern, of Hingham; Raymond A. Petipas, West Newton; James L. Principe, Brockton; John E. Peck, Washington, D.C.; Donald E. Liberty, West Springfield; Jim Rodgers, Jamaica Plain; Miss Virginia Wrobel, Billerica; and Howard Costello of Malden.

One local resident, Robert S. Ward of Cornhill Lane in Marshfield, wrote several letters to the GSA regional office requesting the right to buy the property on behalf of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, claiming to represent a branch of the federal government. Not receiving an answer in as timely a fashion as he liked, Ward scolded the GSA in writing, and then appealed to both young Congressman John F. Kennedy and his colleague, Leverett Saltonstall. Saltonstall copied Ward's words and forwarded them to the GSA on January 16, 1956:

> Now I am speaking for myself and fifteen others who comprise the membership of Gurnet Flotilla, 1-604 of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, whose only excuse for the existence of that unit is to educate the boating public in safety on the water. We are very much interested in obtaining the old Brant Rock (Marshfield) Life Boat Station for our headquarters. It is now in the hands of the General Services Administration. The station is about midway in the area

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covered by our Flotilla, Scituate and Plymouth Harbors. It seems a shame that red tape can't be cut so that the property can be turned over or sold at a very modest figure to a unit of the Coast Guard. I have had no luck as an ordinary citizen. Would you be willing to see what you can do? We would appreciate it no end.

In the meantime, two other events of importance took place with regard to the town's stance on the purchase of the station. On December 28, 1955, Congressman Donald Nicholson had written to the GSA on behalf of Marshfield, requesting that the station not be sold until the community could hold its annual town meeting and vote to appropriate the proper amount of money to purchase and restore it. Second, on January 16, 1956, the GSA determined fair market value at $5000.

On March 5 and 6, according to a letter signed by Selectmen Harold H. Wicher, John W. Flavell and Robert L. Melvin, Marshfield Town Meeting voted "to raise and appropriate the sum of $7,500, and authorized the Selectmen to purchase and repair the Brant Rock Lifeboat Station, and authorized the Moderator to appoint a committee of five (5) to look into recreational possibilities and report to the Selectman."

> The Life Boat Station shall be used for recreational activities including meetings by organizations such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Brownies, Marshfield Lobstermen's Association, Sunrise Beach Association, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, etc., and shall be used for instruction of first aid, swimming, Civil Defence activities to take place on the premises that will be formulated by a recreation committee appointed by the Board of Selectmen.
>
> The population of the Town of Marshfield is approximately 5,000 people of which approximately one-half are geographically located within a reasonable distance of the Life Boat Station. The summer population is in excess of 12,000 additional persons, most of whom live in the Beach Area within a reasonable distance of the Life Boat Station. The recreation facilities are greatly limited in the Marshfield beach area and there is a strong need for a building that can accommodate large numbers of children during the summer season from June to September. Many town officials and Marshfield residents interested in juvenile recreational facilities have studied the advantages of the Life Boat Station and believe that it could be ideally adapted to solve a growing problem in the Town. The building is adequate in size and strategically located in the Brant Rock Area on Main Street and on the beach. The station borders on one of Marshfield's two business centers. The premises are currently in a bad state of repair and the Town is prepared to adequately restore the building to good condition.

In a shrewd move by the Town, Robert Ward, who had opposed the Town's direct purchase of the building over that of the Coast Guard Auxiliary flotilla, had been asked to join the committee to restore the station, with the idea of making the flotilla an integral partner in the long term success of the venture. On June 12, 1956, the Town officially applied to purchase the station. Six more months passed, and the station continued to stand, unguarded, at the edge of the ocean, as fall and winter storms assaulted its exterior. On December 5, Marshfield Town Counsel John Corcoran requested a Letter of Entry from the GSA, stating that the Town needed to make emergency repairs to the building. In the same envelope, the Town re-submitted its application with documents requested by the GSA appended. Two days later, the Town sent a letter to the National Park Service outlining its proposed use of the station for public park purposes. The Park Service, which had viewed the station in 1954 when visiting the Brant Rock Fire Control Station, responded in the affirmative on December 20, 1956, seeing no need for a second site visit.

On January 4, 1957, Town Counsel Corcoran sent a second request to the GSA, hoping to at least gain entry to the main structure, as, he stated, "extremely bad weather has necessitated immediate repairs to the Lifeboat Station and the Town of Marshfield is prepared to make these repairs on receipt of the Letter of Entry from you." On January 10, the GSA finally accepted the Town's application and recommended the transfer, but no paperwork was immediately forthcoming.

Five more months passed. On June 28, 1957, the GSA announced that all transfers of lifeboat stations purchased under the language of the Act of 1875 were temporarily being halted. A dispute had arisen in South Kingston, Rhode Island, regarding the rights of the descendants of the grantors of the land on which the Green Hill Lifeboat Station had been built. The question of ownership of land or ownership of land-use rights had once again arisen, and been referred to the Department of Justice. A year later, on June 23, 1958, an inspection showed that the boat room runway was gone, and that "only the



Keeper Benjamin Manter (left) started his career as a surfman at the Gurnet Life-Saving Station in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Photo courtesy of Richard Boonisar.

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remains can be seen. The buildings are in a dilapidated and vandalized condition and would seem to constitute a hazard to persons using the beach and a fire menace to adjoining buildings."

Two more years passed.

On August 17, 1960, Selectman Wicher wrote to the GSA that :

> The building is a serious fire menace and was, in fact, partly burned last fall. Since it is almost impossible to keep young people from forcing their way into the building there is the constant danger that some youngster will be injured while in the building, or through falling from the tower or roof. The Police and Highway Departments spend considerable time boarding up windows and doors, but due to continuous vandalism, their work never lasts too long. In all probability if this was a privately owned property the owner would be required to raze it, so will you please see what you can do to have this unsightly, dangerous, fire-trap torn down. If this attempt is successful life will be much happier among the abutters, and the Marshfield Selectmen will be indebted to you for your assistance in helping to promote safety and well being among the members of our summer residents.

On August 20, 1960, the GSA wrote to the commander of the First Coast Guard District in Boston that the physical disposition of the Brant Rock Coast Guard Station, until that time as the station was properly disposed, was still the responsibility of the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard responded immediately by calling Marshfield town officials to discuss a temporary permit to use the building on August 31 at the Coast Guard's radio station farther north in town. That day, both sides agreed to a $1 per year user fee, one which transferred liability and basic maintenance responsibilities to the Town, but limited their ability to make any structural changes. The Coast Guard sent the proposed agreement on to the GSA for approval.

Meanwhile, the Town tried another tact, instructing Town Counsel Corcoran to send a letter to GSA, which he did on September 7, 1960, stating that the town was prepared to ask its citizens to vote to take the property by eminent domain. On September 9, the town reiterated its desire to purchase the station and take its chances on any reversionary rights. The GSA responded on September 28, 1960, that they could not make a decision on disposing of the property until a ruling had been handed down by the Justice Department, where the question of reversionary rights was still being examined "informally."

Nine more months passed.

On June 14, 1961, the GSA responded to the Coast Guard's proposed agreement with the Town, imposing several changes. The Coast Guard finalized the agreement with the Town on July 31.



The station garage was one of the surviving outbuildings in the 1950s. Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

In February, 1962, the GSA sent a new letter to the Town of Marshfield, asking if they still were interested in purchasing the Brant Rock station. Town Counsel Corcoran responded on February 15 that it was too late to make an appropriation for the 1962 Town Meeting, but suggested that perhaps one could be made at either a special town meeting or in 1963. On May 25, the GSA informed the Town that the decision made on May 26, 1955, one day short of seven years earlier, that the Government had acquired fee simple title pursuant to the Act of March 3, 1875, had been upheld by the Department of Justice, and that the agreement made to transfer the station in 1956 had also been upheld. If the Town had half of the assessed fair market value on hand, a sum of $2000 (fair market value had recently been recalculated as $4000), the old Brant Rock Lifesaving Station was theirs for the taking. On May 29, the Town responded that once again, an appropriation had to be made at Town Meeting; that took place in 1963. On September 3, 1963, the GSA mailed the fully executed deed conveying the Brant Rock station to the Town of Marshfield, nine years and two months after it had been declared surplus to the needs of the federal government.

The official appraisal of the Brant Rock station by independent appraiser R.W. Coggins took place on April 4, 1962, and was finalized on May 7, 1962. As part of his due diligence, Coggins sought the expertise of several people, including John Corcoran, Marshfield Town Counsel; George Dobson, of the town's highway department; "Mrs. Nunley," of the assessor's office; Blanche Carpenter, Ocean Street, real estate broker; Kevin Hunt, office of Martin Hunt, Ocean Street, also a real estate broker; John Clancy, builder, Marshfield; Flavell Real Estate; "Mr. Damon," the building inspector for the Town of Marshfield; the Alder Real Estate Company, Green Harbor; Denman Baker, Marshfield Lumber Company; and Fred Roberts, Marshfield realtor and appraiser.

"The town has become a very popular summer resort," he wrote, "and many cottages have been built along the coastal area in the past few years. Increasingly in recent years, the town has attracted year-round residents who commute to work on the Boston Metropolitan Area." His statistics showed that 26 per cent of the people employed in Marshfield worked in the construction business, and there was no wonder why; the town's population had grown from 3,267 residents in 1950 to 4,959 in 1955, and 6,748 in 1960. As Superintendent Martinson had described in his original letter to the GSA in 1953, the Baby Boomers were coming, and bringing their elementary school aged children with them. The appraiser's statistics supported the notion that the town at that time could have

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used any available classroom space while the community worked to build new schools.

Coggins pulled no punches in describing the neighborhood in which the Brant Rock station sat. The station, he said, was

> located in a second class summer resort area just north of a run down summer business district...Northerly of the Government property, between Ocean Street and the beach, there are three dwellings, one formerly used as an inn, and then a long stretch where Ocean Street borders directly on the ocean. Southerly of the subject lies a fairly densely built up area of small summer cottages and commercial establishments such as garages, barrooms, souvenir shops, lunchrooms and the like. The majority are located on lots of land averaging from 3,000 to 8,000 square feet of land. This area was developed almost entirely around the turn of the century. About 1940 a fire swept the beach area of Marshfield known as Ocean Bluff located about ½ mile to the north of the subject property. As a result that area has since been largely rebuilt with small but comparatively new summer cottages. The subject's neighborhood continues as mostly a dilapidated area, except for the church and vacant lot to the west across Ocean Street. The ocean directly in front of the subject is used for swimming but is somewhat rocky and is known to have an undertow at times. Beach properties in this area are subject to storm damage about six months of the year.

The land on which the station had been built in 1893 had little perceived value as well. "A hurricane in March of this year threw tons of rocks and small boulders over the sea wall and deposited them against the buildings... The whole area, including subject property, is reported to have been marshland which was filled in during the years following the Civil War. There are no known mineral deposits of commercial value."

Coggins then assessed the buildings on the property.

> The building overall needs considerable work, has been vandalized and damaged by fire. The coal burner and boiler are of no value, although this would be a minor consideration to anyone contemplating purchasing the property for only summer uses. The kitchen has been stripped of all equipment except an old sink. The interior needs redecoration from top to bottom, including considerable re-lathing and re-plastering. A fire three years ago charred the lookout tower and the interior was damaged by water used in putting out the fire. One window was left unboarded and the tower has been used as a pigeon roast [sic] and nesting area since. Snow and rain have done additional damage.
>
> The main floors are sound, the timbers are in good shape, the sills show a little dry rot, the foundation has minor cracks. Structurally the building is very rugged and in fair to good condition.
>
> The extior [sic] needs considerable work. A new roof, replacement of some gutters and downspouts and painting of trim are immediate needs. The siding is in fair to poor condition and portions need replacement. The chimney was rebuilt about six years ago.
>
> The garage (12'5" x 35'6") can be used for small boat storage, or a workshop. Its utility as a garage is limited because of the steep concrete incline and narrow doors. The building needs repair but can be fixed up for the uses mentioned above for a small sum.
>
> The 75' high steel flag tower is of no value and in my opinion would be considered an eyesore and nuisance to the average buyer. Any scrap value would approximately be cancelled by cost of removal.
>
> The launchway on the plan could not be observed due to the rock piled against the seawall.
>
> About a foot of the seawall has been broken off. The wall should be about two to three feet higher to afford proper protection. The cost of rebuilding the wall will be borne by the state, county and town but when any appropriation for this project would be made is problematical.
>
> The subject property has town water and town sewerage. The sewerage tax is one-half of the water bill and the latter is based on number of faucets. Commercial electric power is available from Plymouth County Electric Company. The Brockton-Taunton mains are in the street. Storm drains are all along Ocean Street.
>
> The concrete sidewalks are broken and cracked. The porch is in satisfactory shape. The concrete inclines are not attractive or useful.

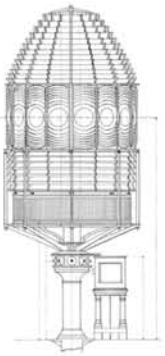
As for the "highest and best use" of the property, Coggins noted that the town had adopted zoning in 1926, and that the building could only be used as a residence where it sat. There were three options, in his opinion. Repair and improvement would be expensive, with fuel costs proving especially prohibitive. Rental as a summer home would cause similar problems for any landlord. Ultimately, the appraiser suggested razing the station and building a moderately priced summer home on the site.

With the help of the John J. Duane Building Wrecking Company of Quincy, Coggins provided some quick and simple math. Duane suggested a bill of $1500 to demolish the building, provided he could salvage and take home $400 worth of salable material. For that price, he would even go so far as to knock out the foundation and take it to the dump. The garage could be re-used, Coggins said, for $200 in repairs. The main building, in his mind, had absolutely no value. The garage, he figured, was still worth $500. The oceanfront parcel of land, on the other hand, could probably fetch $5000. If the Town could sell the property after razing the main building, it might bring in $4000. The town tore it down in 1967.

For nearly a decade, the Town of Marshfield had held out hope that they might take on a preservation challenge and adaptively re-use a symbol of their community's historical connection to the sea. Yet, at the end of that period, one dragged to its extreme length by pathetic federal governmental inactivity and mishandling, they found that the Brant Rock Life-Saving Station had been so adversely affected by the ravages of time, weather and vandals, that it had gone from sterling community potential to disappointingly dangerous and dilapidated eyesore.

And so, today, there is no monument to the lifesavers of Brant Rock, no reminder of the days when Marshfield men unselfishly risked their lives in the hopes of helping their fellow men. Instead, there is an empty, rocky lot, itself a barren testimonial to what might have been.

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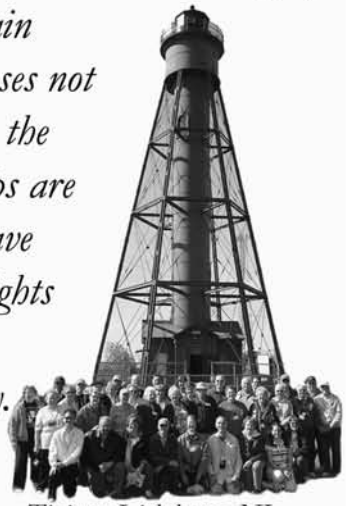
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