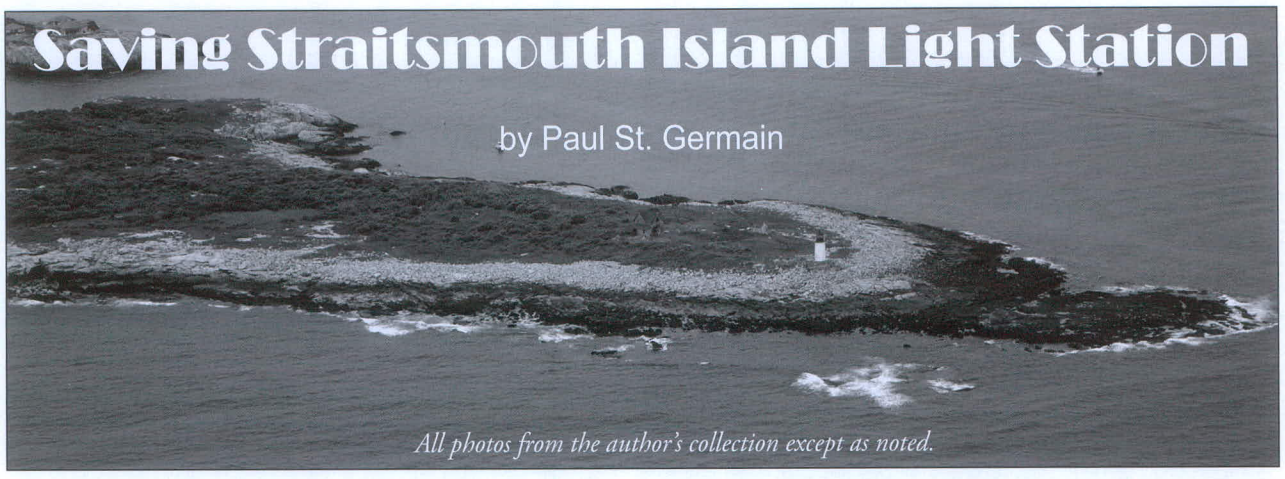
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Saving Straitsmouth Island Light Station

by Paul St. Germain



All photos from the author's collection except as noted.

Since the U.S.Coast Guard left Straitsmouth Island Light Station in the 1930s, it has been owned by a number of private owners and by the 1960s had been totally abandoned. It has been on the doomsday list of endangered lighthouses since that time. A joint effort by the Thacher Island Association, the town of Rockport, and the Massachusetts Audubon Society has been established to save this historic and iconic lighthouse station first established in 1834. The station is on the National Register of Historic Places and is adjacent to its sister island of Thacher, which itself is a National Historic Landmark.

Straitsmouth Island is located near the harbor entrance to Rockport, Massachusetts, just north of Gloucester and about 35 miles north of Boston.

Straitsmouth's Early History

When Captain John Smith, the founder of Jamestown in 1607, returned in 1614 to explore the coast of New England, he came across three islands near Cape Ann, Massachusetts, near Rockport. He named them the Three Turks Heads. The islands' profiles reminded him of the turbans worn by the Turks. Those islands today are named Milk, Thacher, and Straitsmouth.



Smith was an explorer and a mercenary soldier. He traveled extensively around Europe, the Mediterranean, and Turkey. While in Transylvania working for a Prince Bathory, Smith participated in three jousts with Turkish soldiers during a siege. Smith was the victor in all three jousts, succeeding in decapitating all three of the enemy. As a reward Prince Bathory granted him a patent for a coat of arms bearing three Turks heads on a shield.

He named the area New England for King Charles and also named what is today called Cape Ann. He gave Cape Ann the name of Cape Tragizabanda after a Greek maiden who had been kind to him while he was enslaved as a prisoner of war by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire.

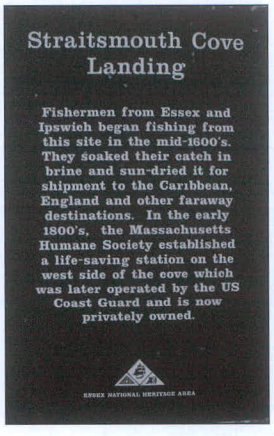
When Smith presented his map to Charles I, he suggested that Charles should feel free to change any of the "barbarous names" (meaning the many Native American names) for "English" ones.

The king made many such changes, but only four survive today, one of which is Cape Ann, which Charles named in honor of his mother, Anne of Denmark.

Historians say that long before the coming of its first resident, Richard Tarr, to Sandy Bay (now Rockport), this coast was frequently visited by fishermen from Essex, Salem, and Ipswich, who made the many coves about Cape Ann their headquarters, particularly Gap Cove, Long Cove (now Rockport Harbor), Pigeon Cove and Loblolly Cove.

Here they built temporary shelter and dressed and cured their fish in the sun on large tables called fish flakes. This practice was carried on until about 1720.

The name Straitsmouth prevailed previous to the year 1700, for history shows that in 1695 John Babson had three acres of land granted him at Straitsmouth as encouragement to set up fishing, and in 1699 Straitsmouth Island was granted by the General Court to Captain James Davis of Gloucester " in consideration that he had been at much charge and expense in the late war with the French and Indian enemy, and spent much time in said service."



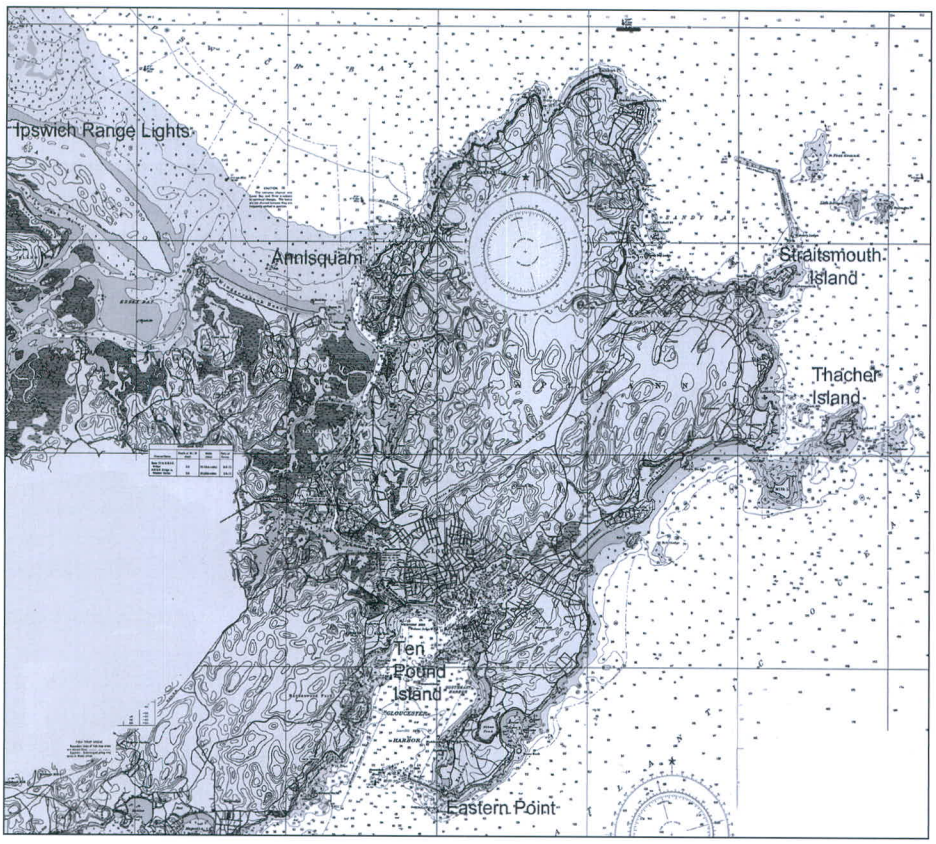
Straitsmouth, "a Dangerous Spot in the Ocean"

This entire area around Cape Ann is extremely hazardous to shipping interests, beginning with the harbor entrance near Avery's Ledge where Anthony Thacher lost his family in 1635 and eventually wound up wrecked on Thacher Island. Thacher Island, then known as Thacher's Woe, was awarded to him by the General Court of Massachusetts "for his troubles."

Charts of Cape Ann show that there are six lighthouses within a 20-square-mile area.

On these charts can be seen numerous ledges and rocks; the Londoner Reef; and Thacher, Straitsmouth, and Milk islands. Rocks include Oak Rock, Twelve Foot Rock, Dodge Rock, Bartlett Rock, Mitchell Rock, Harbor Rock and Pigeon Rock. Add to this the frequent nor'easters and shallow water. All combine

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to make the area one of the most dangerous along the Massachusetts coast.

Just in the two-square-mile area near Rockport and Straitsmouth Island there are three lighthouses, a life-saving station, numerous buoys, and markers, all in close proximity.

A few statistics are important: in the 1880 Life-Saving Service annual report for 1881, Davis Neck Life-Saving Station in Annisquam reported 23 disasters, six vessels lost and 122 lives saved. The 1894 issue of *New England Magazine* stated that "in this area for the past 20 years 147 wrecks were reported and 560 partial disasters."

The 29 acres of Straitsmouth Island is surrounded by reefs, shoals, and ledges that can be lethal to mariners. The lighthouse that stands on Straitsmouth today is in fact the third to have been built there.

The First of Three Lighthouses

The first Straitsmouth Lighthouse was built in 1835, spurred on by the increasing number of ships sailing to Pigeon Cove for cargoes of granite from Rockport's burgeoning granite industry. The first lighthouse was only 19 feet tall, poorly constructed, leaky, and with lamps out of plumb. Not only that, but it was situated 300 feet too far away from the point of the island it was intended to warn against.

In 1851 construction began on a new lighthouse, a 24-foot-tall, octagonal, stone tower, at a location 87 yards closer to the island's point.

A fixed sixth-order Fresnel lens added in 1857, which was eventually changed to a six second white blinking light beacon.

By 1896 the light again needed rebuilding, and the current lighthouse was built. A *Notice to Mariners* announced the new light and its new location. Dated July 21,1896, it stated: "Notice is hereby given that on or about July 30,1896 the 6th order fixed white light at this station, on the NE point of Straitsmouth, N side of Cape Ann will be moved to be exhibited from the new tower recently erected 45 feet N+W from the present temporary tower."

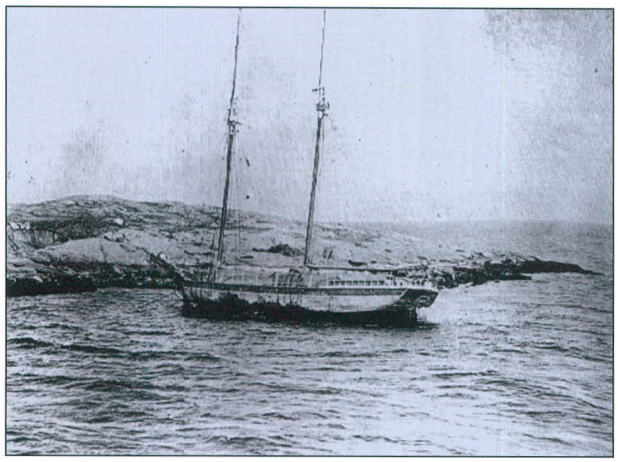
A few months before the light was moved to a skeletal tower while the old tower was removed.

The 37-foot cylindrical brick tower was erected center on center of the original foundation of the 1851 lighthouse. This 1896 lighthouse is the one that still stands on Straitsmouth today.

The oil house was added about 1905.

Other Structures

The current keeper house built in 1878 contained five rooms including, two bedrooms, a parlor, kitchen, and dining room. It had a covered cistern as well as a



The schooner *Winnie Lowry*, laden with lumber, dragged anchor from Sandy Bay onto rocks near Straitsmouth Island in April 1912.

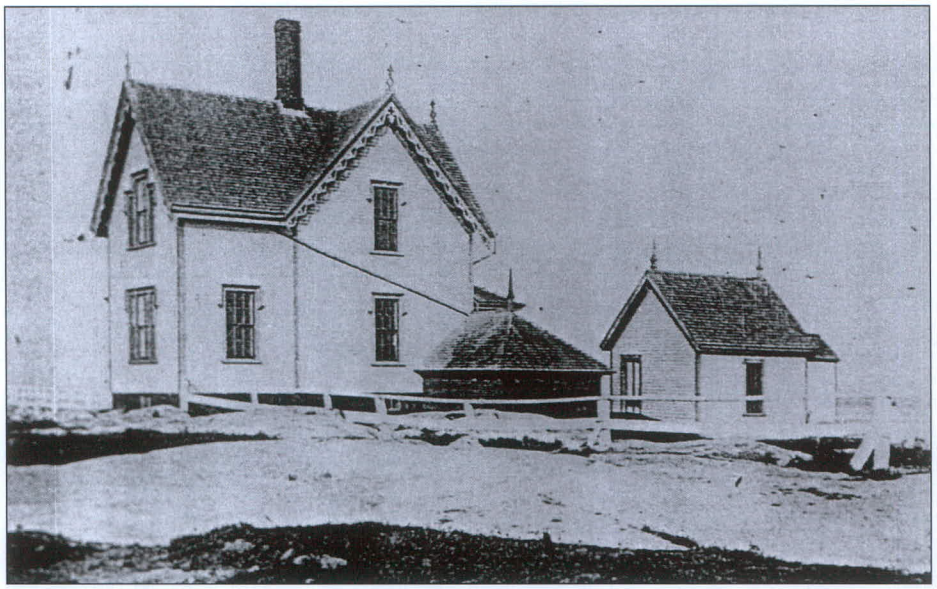
Keepers of Straitsmouth Island Lighthouse Station

Benjamin Andrews	1835-1840
Capt. John Davis	1841-1849
Henry F. Low	1849-1850
Sylvester Pearce	1850-1853
Ebenezer Pool Jr.	1853-1860
Sylvester Pearce	1860-1861
John S. Wheeler	1861-1866
William Cunningham	1866-1866
Nehemiah Knowlton	1866-1879
Frank H. Dennis	1879-1883
Walter S. Rogers	1883-1892
Walter S. Thompson	1892-1893
Thomas W. Newcomb	1893-1912
Thomas Creed	1913-1918
John E.H. Cook	1918-1925

Straitsmouth Island has seen only 15 keepers during the 90 years from 1835 until 1920s. Most served for two or three years. The longest service was by Thomas Newcomb who served 19 years from 1893-1912.

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The keeper's house, c. 1879. A drain pipe can be seen running from the roof that catches rain water and diverts it into the brick cistern below.





The three Straitsmouth Island lighthouses.
Top: The original 1835 lighthouse.
Center: Postcard depicting the 1857 lighthouse. Courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.
Bottom: A 1925 photo of the 1896 tower which still stands today. Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

milking barn for cows which were kept there, and an outdoor privy. The same design plan was used for Thacher Island, Seguin Island, and Bakers Island's.

Island Ownership Timeline

The island has gone through a number of owners over the years.

1695–John Babson.

1699–Captain James Davis.

1834–Sold by Aaron and Solomon Poole of Gloucester to the U.S. government for $600.

1834–Operated by the U.S. Lighthouse Service until it was consolidated into the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939.

1934–USCG moved off and the government licensed Edward Knowlton to use and occupy station for $20/month.

1937–Government declared station surplus and disposed of it.

1941–Sold to Glenn Wilson of New York City, a playwright and advertising copy writer, for $3,050.

1943–Island bought by Edward Nelson Wendell, who also owned the Seacrest Manor on Marmion Way adjacent to the island, which he bought from Arthur Park, owner of Durgin-Park restaurant in Boston.

William Francis Gibbs bought the island from Wendell in the 1950s. Gibbs was a famous naval architect and marine engineer who directed the design and production of Liberty ships in WWII and designed the luxury liner SS *United States*. On her maiden voyage on July 4, 1952, she broke *Queen Mary*'s 14-year transatlantic record by 10 hours. She was taken out of service in 1969, and since 1996 has been docked at pier 82 on the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

Upon Gibb's death in 1967, his brother Frederick donated it to the Massachusetts Audubon Society for use as a wildlife sanctuary. A plaque on a giant boulder marks the occasion today.

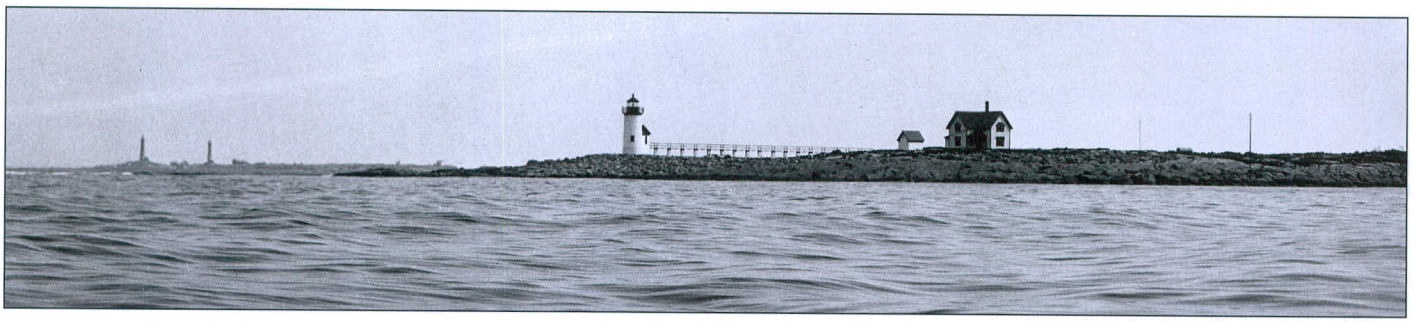


William Francis Gibbs.

A Life-Saving Station Becomes a U.S. Coast Guard Station

In 1880 there were 15 life-saving stations in the Massachusetts district. There were four life-saving stations on Cape Ann. Gap Cove was designated #3, Davis Neck was designated as #2, and others were in Rockport.

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Here is an interesting old panorama shot showing the Straitsmouth structures and Thacher Island in the background. A boat slip and a 315-foot wooden walkway was added in 1867.

Bear Skin Neck was #4 and Emerson Point was #5.

Davis Neck Station was built in 1874 and was located on a 47-acre estate owned by civil war General Benjamin Butler in the Bay View section of Annisquam. Butler was a lawyer, politician and the 33rd governor of Massachusetts in 1884. He served as state representative in the 1850s and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives for three terms from 1867-1879. He also ran for president in 1884 with the Greenback party.

Butler was a savvy politician but not a great general, although a favorite of Abraham Lincoln, who made him a major general. His failures in battle cost him his job and Lincoln ordered Ulysses S. Grant to fire him, but not before Lincoln asked him to be his vice presidential running mate which Butler refused.

Butler did have some redeeming values and was a staunch defender of civil rights, having introduced the first civil right bill in the US Congress in 1875. He was a friend of labor and championed Irish immigrants.

Butler first approached the federal government to build the life-saving station at Davis Point in 1873, which just so happened to be on his land. He was a controversial character who was often criticized in the press.

Butler was an enigma. At one point his military and political reputation was so negative that his picture was placed at the bottom of chamber pots sold across the country.

About this same time he had purchased the yacht *America* from the U.S. Navy in 1873, which used it as a training ship. The yacht had been used as a racer in 1851 and was the namesake for the famous America's Cup race. The yacht had been a blockade runner for the North and the South as it changed hands many times during the Civil War.

Butler sailed it out of Gloucester until his death in 1893. Apparently he wanted a life-saving station near his home so that when



General Benjamin Butler. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

he sailed the rocky shores of Cape Ann he could have a sense of safety for himself and his yacht.

By 1883 Davis Neck was abandoned it suffered constant damage from northeastern storms. The station was reestablished at a more protected area and in 1889 moved to Gap Cove Station, which is adjacent to Straitsmouth Island. It was built in the Duluth-style architecture of the time. There were 28 similarly styled stations built in the country, six in Massachusetts.

Then in 1902 the Gap Cove Life-Saving Station was renamed Straitsmouth Life-Saving Station.

In 1915 the U.S. Coast Guard was created by President Wilson by combining the U.S Life-Saving Service and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. In 1939 the U.S. Lighthouse Service was also incorporated into the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard moved off Straitsmouth in the 1930s when the island was declared surplus by the federal government. The government closed the keeper's house and moved the Coast Guardsmen into the life-saving station, which was located about 500 yards from the backside of the island in Gap Cove.

The life-saving station officially became Straitsmouth Coast Guard Station #22 in 1937.

Straitsmouth Today

Straitsmouth Lighthouse was automated with solar power in 1990 and a green flashing light replaced the white beacon. The lighthouse continues to be an official aid to navigation.

In 1991 the "Perfect Storm" tore out the entry house. In 1992 the Coast Guard repaired it and decided not to replace the entry room cabin, but also added rip rap boulders around the tower to protect it.

In 2000 the National Lighthouse Preservation Act was passed and allowed the Coast Guard to offer its lighthouse inventory to interested parties who would agree to maintain them as historic landmarks. Members of the Thacher Island Association (TIA) went to Rockport's board of selectmen with an offer to apply for the lighthouse. The Town approved the application, and in 2009 Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar notified town officials that the lighthouse would be awarded to the town along with 1.8 acres of land it stood on. In 2010 the town officially accepted the island.

Access was needed to the island as there is no dock, ramp, or mooring facilities available.



Gap Cove Life-Saving Station.

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A 3500-pound mooring stone was installed on the northeast end to use as a haul out mooring where boats can tie up to land. Holes were drilled in the ledge and iron cleats installed to be used for tie ups when the launch delivers people and materials.

In 2011 the town signed an easement license to cross Audubon property, and volunteers began preliminary work on trails and restoring the oil house for storage. A trail was cut to the oil house and the light tower.

In 2011 the TIA volunteers restored the 1905 oil house. Audubon offered use of the oil house to the TIA as a storage facility to use when work on the tower repairs begins.

Thacher volunteers completely restored this oil house adding a new roof, trim, door, copper flashing, and lightning arrestors.

Finally, in the fall of 2011, Audubon agreed to begin stabilizing the keeper's house. They airlifted materials and hired a contractor to stabilize and weatherproof the house in the fall of 2011.

Although there are no current plans to make the house habitable, it has been stabilized and sealed against entry to the public and is insured to remain standing for many years to come. This summer Audubon will apply a new roof and fascia and the Thacher volunteers are applying new clapboards.





Before (above) and after (below) photos of the oil house. Thacher volunteers completely restored this oil house adding a new roof, trim, door, copper flashing, and lightning arrestors.

In the next year or two work will begin on the tower itself. In the interior it needs new support beams that hold up the upper floor just under the lantern room. Substantial brick work on both the interior and exterior is also needed.

A new interpretive sign has been installed on Bear Skin Neck on the shore of Rockport Harbor where one can get a long distance view of this iconic site as well as read about its history for those who cannot make it out to the island.



Left: Straitsmouth Lighthouse after 1991's "Perfect Storm."

Fund raising continues for its restoration and maintenance, with about a quarter of the funding having been raised toward a goal of $240,000.

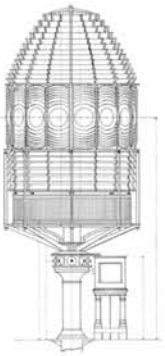
The Thacher Island Association is proud to have been instrumental in helping to save Straitsmouth Island for the next generation. It will continue to be a cultural and historic icon and a scenic setting to be enjoyed by the residents and visitors to Rockport for many years to come.



The dilapidated keeper's house (above) is being transformed (below) by Thacher Island Association volunteers.



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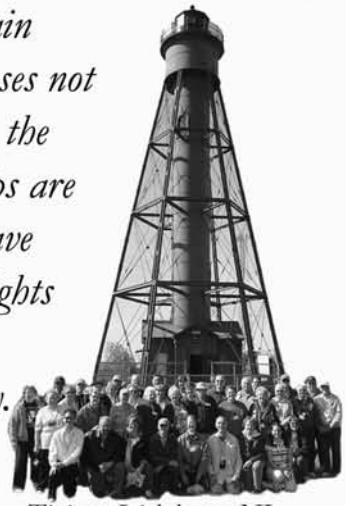
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