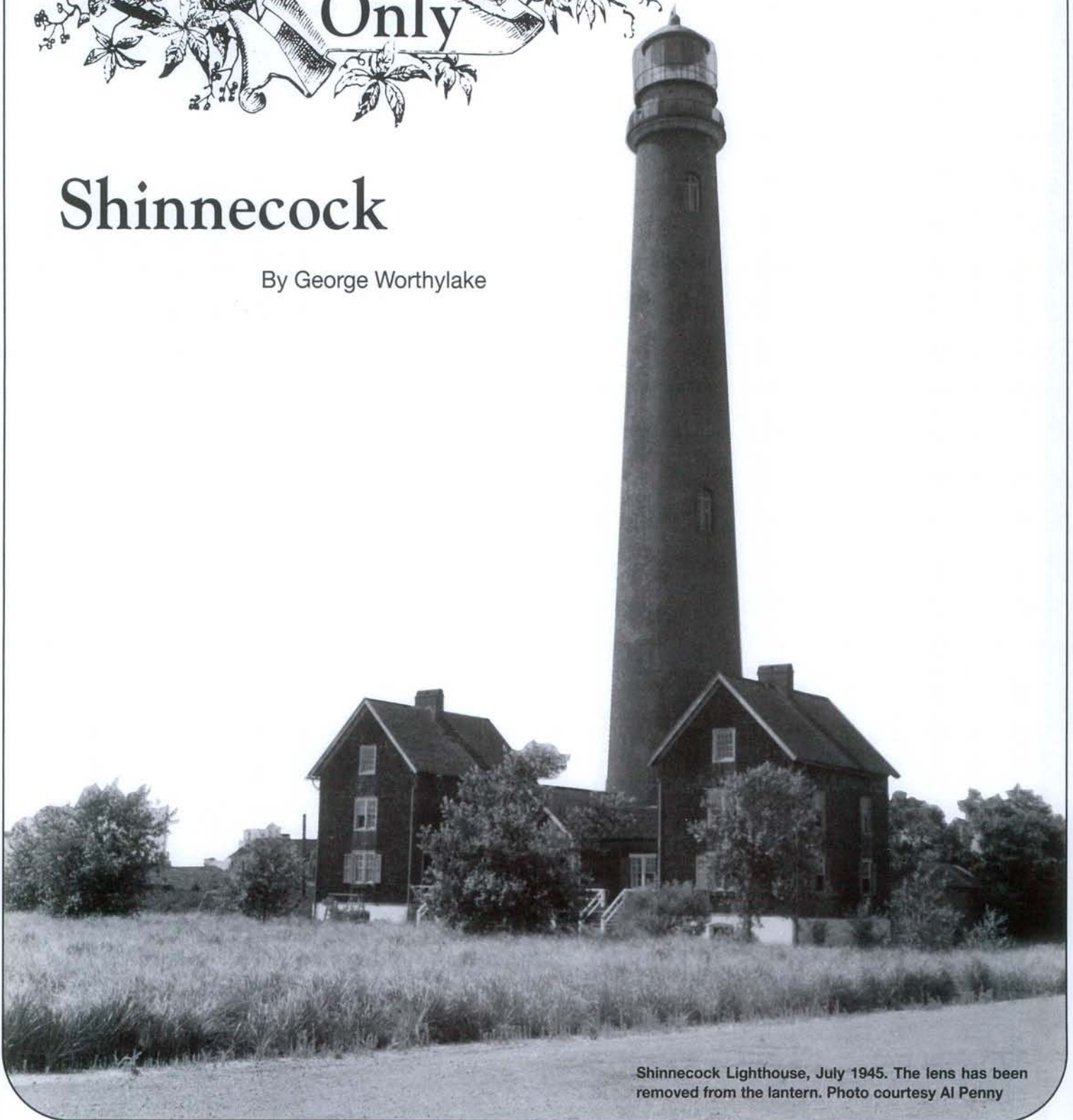




# Shinnecock

By George Worthylake



Shinnecock Lighthouse, July 1945. The lens has been removed from the lantern. Photo courtesy Al Penny

Montauk Point at the tip of Long Island, NY, was the first land sighted by vessels sailing to New York City from Europe, and an important turning point for vessels bound from New England to New York. Recognizing this the federal government constructed a lighthouse at Montauk Point in 1797. To further assist vessels navigate the length of Long Island, another lighthouse was constructed 75 miles west on Fire Island in 1826. However, this still left a dark hole between the two stations, and in 1854 the Lighthouse Board successfully petitioned Congress for \$35,000 to construct a station at Shinnecock, almost midway between the Montauk Point and Fire Island stations. The station was completed in 1857, on the south shore of Long Island at Ponquogue Point next to Shinnecock Bay. These three major seacoast lights would ensure that the mariner always had at least one light in sight as he navigated along the south shore of Long Island, and at times two signals could be observed.

When completed, the lighthouse at Shinnecock was first listed in the Light List as the Great West Bay Light. However, within a few years the name was officially changed to Shinnecock, although the locals called it the Ponquogue Point Light over the years.

In 1928, an 84-year-old local resident of the area, Edward Squires, recounted the building of the Shinnecock lighthouse in a local newspaper —

Yes, the Shinnecock lighthouse celebrated its 70th anniversary last New Year's night, and I can well remember when it was built; I was a lad of thirteen then. The government sent engineers here to select a site. They were thinking of building the light on the ocean beach. The late Joseph Jacobs, who was a pal of mine during the Civil War, sailed them across to the beach in his boat. After they had inspected the shifting sand dunes, they decided to build it on firmer ground and selected Long Point. This particular point of land belonged to the late Edward Foster. The piece contained ten acres and the government paid him \$100 an acre, which was considered an immense price in those days.

There being no railroads on this part of the island at that time all of the lumber, stone and bricks had to be brought by sailing vessels through Peconic Bay . . . from where it was carted across to the present site in box wagons. The foundation was started ten feet or more below ground. Big yellow pine timbers were laid criss-cross in the water and set in place with concrete until it reached up level with the ground. Then three tiers of coping stones weighing two tons each were cemented into place to form the base. The body of the light [tower] is made of bricks and if I remember rightly one hundred thousand bricks were used. A big steel column runs up through the center of the tower with 187 spiral wooden steps attached. Some years later they were replaced by iron steps. Many times when I was a boy I ran all the way from the bottom to the top without stopping. Two ton

coping stones were set in the base of the lantern. They had to be hoisted into place by hand operated blocks and falls. I well remember the first stone raised, it was just before sundown on a very quiet day. Men strained at the ropes and the stone slowly [rose] upward; the hoisting mast stood solid. As soon as the stone got to the top and was balanced just inboard, the mast went into a million splinters. This was the nearest to a serious accident that they had. As the bricks were laid, scaffolding was put up; made of green pine poles lashed together. The workmen on the job were green Irishmen straight from the old country. I have often seen the men with hods over their shoulders come down the ladders without touching them with their hands. Before the light was made into a revolving one, birds in their flights at night were attracted by the light and would dive head on into the glass [of the lantern room], often breaking it. After[wards], a little heavy wire netting was placed outside the glass. In those days it was nothing strange for a dozen or two ducks or geese to be found on the ground in the morning. The completed tower measured 150 feet from the base to the center of the lantern. The walls at the base of the tower are 8 feet thick and at the top 3 feet.

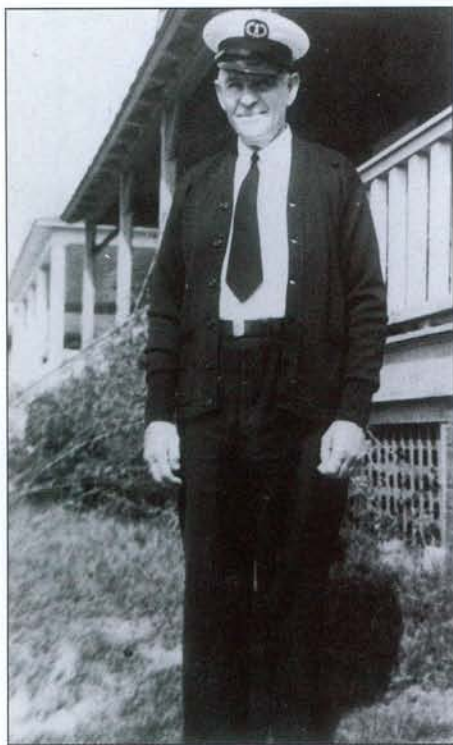
Much of the material (information and photos) for this article was sent to us by Keeper Al Penny of Hampton Bays, NY, who was employed by the Lighthouse Service and has a lot of tales to tell. In a recent letter Al wrote, "I well remember Mr. Squires. His house still stands just west of where I live . . . during summer months he use to hold Sunday School on his porch, he was a great man standing 6'6", hands like two hams and what a handshake. He passed on in the mid '30s. The Edward Foster that he mentioned was my great grandfather."

Shinnecock's characteristic remained fixed until 1914, when a brass eclipser was installed producing a Group Flashing White characteristic.

The Shinnecock lighthouse faithfully served the mariner for 73 years, but the needs of the mariner and changes to the local navigation systems obviated the need to maintain the light station. Keep-



er Thomas, the last keeper of the station, extinguished the kerosene fueled light for the last time at sunrise on August 1, 1931 (the light station was never electrified).



**George J. Thomas, the last keeper of the Shinnecock Light Station, shown here in front of the Seagirt, NJ Lighthouse in 1935. Photo courtesy of Al Penny.**

**I**n 1934, an automatic electric light was installed on a small tower on the beach. The government offered the light station to Suffolk County for one dollar. Although there were several ideas for its use (museum, park), the local Supervisors (with limited funds during those depression years) turned down the offer and the lighthouse stood silent and vacant until 1948, when the tower was condemned by the government. Ironically the hurricane of 1938 demolished the new modern beacon but left the tall light tower and homes unscathed.

Over the years the lighthouse was a menace to the thousands of wild ducks, geese and other birds that took refuge in Shinnecock Bay, especially during the migration seasons. The ray of the light, when the station was in operation, blinded the birds and they flew into the tower.

In December, 1948, a group of engineers and wreckers tore away the lower portion of the foundation, shoring up the tower with huge wooden timbers as bricks were removed. On December 23, the timbers were set afire and when they burned through the 160' tall tower collapsed onto the beach, a pile of bricks that once was an elegant lighthouse . . . only yesterday.



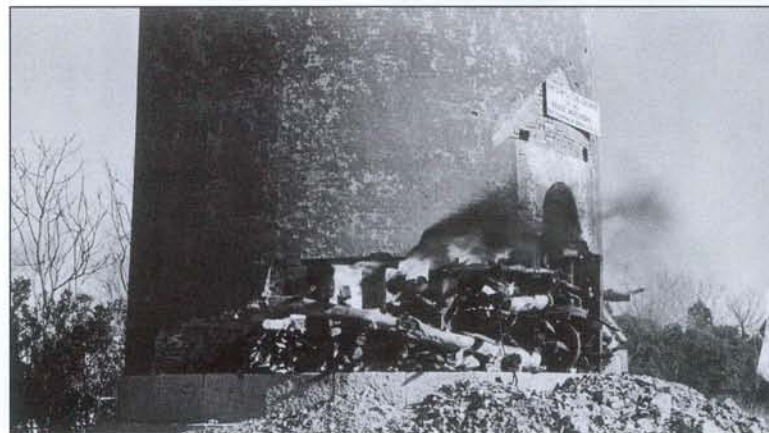
**Above - workmen jack-hammer away at the thick base.**

**Right - As brick was removed the tower was shored up with heavy timbers.**

**Below - Finally, the timbers were set on fire. U.S. Coast Guard photos courtesy of Al Penny.**



**The tower acts like a chimney as smoke pours from windows and the lantern.**





Going, going, gone! When the timbers burn through, the tower collapses to the beach, December 23, 1948. The building below is the Shinnecock Coast Guard Station boat house. Coast Guard photos courtesy of Al Penny.



Keeper John Raynor, who had been appointed to the post on October 14, 1893, used most of the land for grazing his five cows, and the outbuildings for housing his horse and eleven pigs. The first assistant keeper took over the unused oil house as his workshop, and with the second assistant, he shared two small, fenced-in parcels that they maintained as vegetable gardens.

When Maj. Charles Potter of the Third Light House District arrived to inspect the station in November of 1909, he was met by Keeper Raynor. As the two approached the old oil house, Maj. Potter asked what it was being used for. Before the keeper was able to answer, both were startled by a high-pitched female voice: "John uses that work shop and he's going to use it too as long as he's here." Trying to avoid further confrontation, Major Potter walked away and heard, "John you come here." He looked back and saw First Assistant John Potter leave what he was doing and go up to his quarters. The shrill-voiced woman fired off another salvo: "He's got every devilish thing at this station except that old oil house and now he's trying to get that. There ain't a devilish thing left for John. He's got everything filled with his hogs, his cows and his horse!"

Maj. Potter later recounted that as he walked away in disgust, the voice followed me growing louder and louder as the distance increased but I purposely avoided hearing any more — I could not have felt more uncanny if I had been in an insane asylum."

Following the incident, Assistant Keeper Potter apologized for his wife's behavior. "I would not have had it if I could have helped it," he wrote, "but women get sore sometimes and talk a good deal more than they might."

Maj. Potter's first inclination had been to dismiss the assistant, a punishment that may seem a bit drastic by modern standards, but not so at the time. After tempers cooled, he wrote, "I am rather loath to recommend drastic action in this case for such an old and faithful employee of the Board." In many ways, the problems of the keepers were no different from those of the rest of society.

The foregoing is excerpted from the book *Northeast Lights* by Robert G. Bac-hand reprinted courtesy of the author. This fine book on lighthouses and lightships from Rhode Island to Cape May, NJ is available through the Keeper's Library.