

A Lighthouse for Drum Point

by Dennis L. Noble and Ralph E. Eshelman

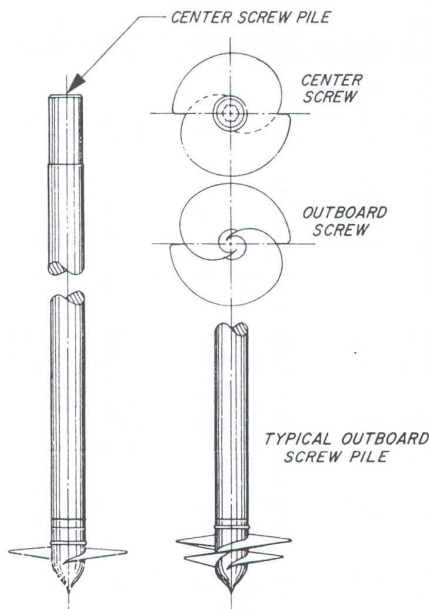
In 1853 Lieutenant A. M. Pennock, of the U.S. Lighthouse Board, filed a report on his survey of Chesapeake Bay. He commented that “a small light should be placed on Drum Point, inside of the Patuxent River.” Pennock pointed out that in foul weather vessels of all classes took advantage of a lee offered by the Point and several vessels had “brought up on the spit” while trying to seek shelter. One hundred and twenty-two years later, the Drum Point Lighthouse would be lifted bodily from its foundations and transported some two nautical miles to a new location on the grounds of the Calvert Marine Museum, Solomons, Maryland. The story of the Drum Point Lighthouse and its remarkable journey offers a unique look into our maritime heritage and the efforts to preserve it.

Due to Pennock's report. Congress authorized \$5,000 on August 3, 1854 for “a light-house on Drum Point, entrance of Patuxent River.” Passing an authorization is one thing, actually building a lighthouse can be quite another. The \$5,000 appropriation languished in the bureaucracy for some eighteen years. Then, on August 7, 1882, Congress again authorized money for aids to navigation in this portion of the Bay. This time the bill provided for the “establishment of two range lights at the mouth of the Patuxent River.” This plan also went awry. In the words of the Lighthouse Service, the “smallness of the appropriation” caused the Service to go ahead with a lighthouse as originally planned.

The Lighthouse Board decided Drum Point should be a screwpile-type structure, resembling nothing less than

a large six sided cottage on tall metal stilts or piles. A history of screwpile lighthouses can be found in Layne Bergin's article in this issue and will not be repeated here.

Work finally began on the lighthouse on July 17, 1883. The ten-inch-diameter, wrought-iron piles, made by the Allentown Rolling Mills of Philadelphia, were fitted with three foot wide auger flanges. Each of the piles were then laboriously hand-bored into the bottom of the Patuxent River like giant screws. The pieces of the spider-



like foundation were precut before shipping and were assembled at the site, like a large tinkertoy set. (During the recent restoration of the structure some of the letters and numbers identifying matching parts were found). By the twenty-fourth of July 1883 the seven screwpiles were in position.

With the pilings in place, work began on the house, or “cottage.” Construction moved rapidly and soon the six sided wooden house was ready for painting and occupation. The cottage, a solidly built, one-and-one-half story affair, had mortised and tenoned joints and was sheathed with weatherboards. The main floor is divided into four equal sized rooms: sitting room, keeper's bedroom, dining room, and kitchen. Two doors and six windows opened out onto a gallery surrounding the main floor. From the gallery, two iron ladders descended to the water's edge. A central spiral flight of stairs near the sitting room led up to the second floor where another bedroom used by the assistant keeper and the bell room were situated. By no coincidence, the head keeper's bedroom was as far away from the bell room as possible; it was the assistant keeper who slept almost next to this constant noisemaker during poor visibility. At the top of another flight of stairs was the lantern room where the lens was housed. A second gallery surrounds the lantern room.

The cottage received a coat of white paint, while the metal roof and pilings were coated with red. Below the cottage an open fuel storage platform was built between the pilings for storage of wood, oil, and coal. The prefabrication and shallow depth of water, about ten feet, allowed the lighthouse to be finished in just thirty-three days and at the original cost of the 1853 appropriation—\$5,000.

Drum Point Lighthouse was fitted with a fourth order classical Fresnel lens made by Henry Le Pauté of Paris, France which cost about \$1,200 or over



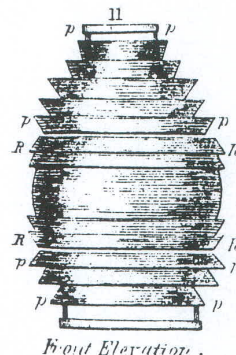
Keeper William Yeatman with his children William, age 11, Loretta, age 9, Louis, age 7, Estelle, age 5, and one of his chickens kept on shore. Photo taken September 9, 1918. Note wooden bridge connecting light to shore. Photo courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

one-fifth the total cost of the station. The focal plane of the beam produced by the lens was forty-seven feet above the water and the light could be seen on a clear night from the deck of a vessel fifteen feet above the sea thirteen nautical miles away. Drum Point originally displayed a red light which was produced by placing a red chimney over the lamp. Because the station was located on a point of land, the light covered only 270 degrees of the horizon, as the remaining ninety-degree sector was over land. Sometime before 1909 the red chimney was replaced with a white one, and three sheets of ruby red glass were attached to the inside of the lantern room storm panes (windows). This

created three red sectors, with white in between. A mariner approaching Drum Point Light could navigate into the Patuxent River from the Bay by staying within the white sectors of the light. The light was classed as fixed, that is, it emitted a steady beam and did not rotate or blink. Percy Budlong, a Chesapeake Bay yachtsman, gives the following description of navigating into the Patuxent River one night in 1923.

“A strong wind from the northeast started up shortly after we had passed Cedar Point light, and made the boats roll considerably as they turned diagonally into the mouth of the Patuxent. Cove

Point light was visible by this time, of course, and its bright white flash shone out every 30 seconds. As soon as Drum Point light turned from red to white we headed directly for it. . . .

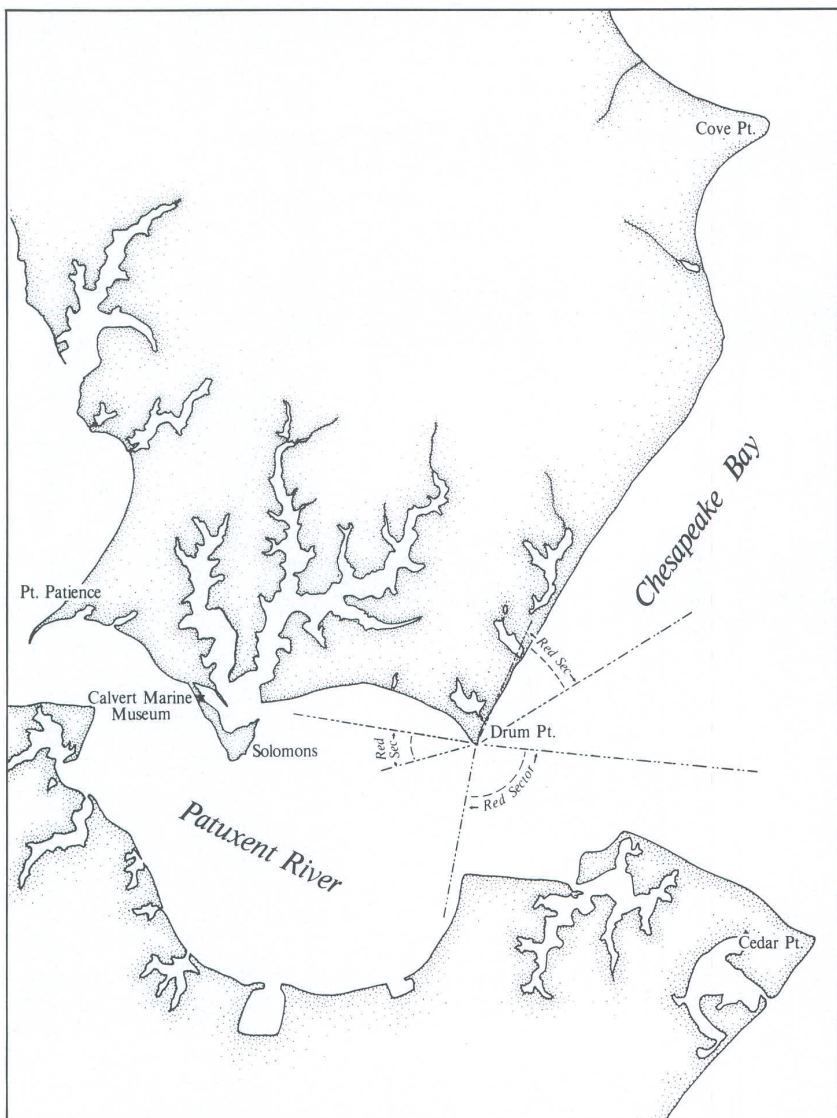


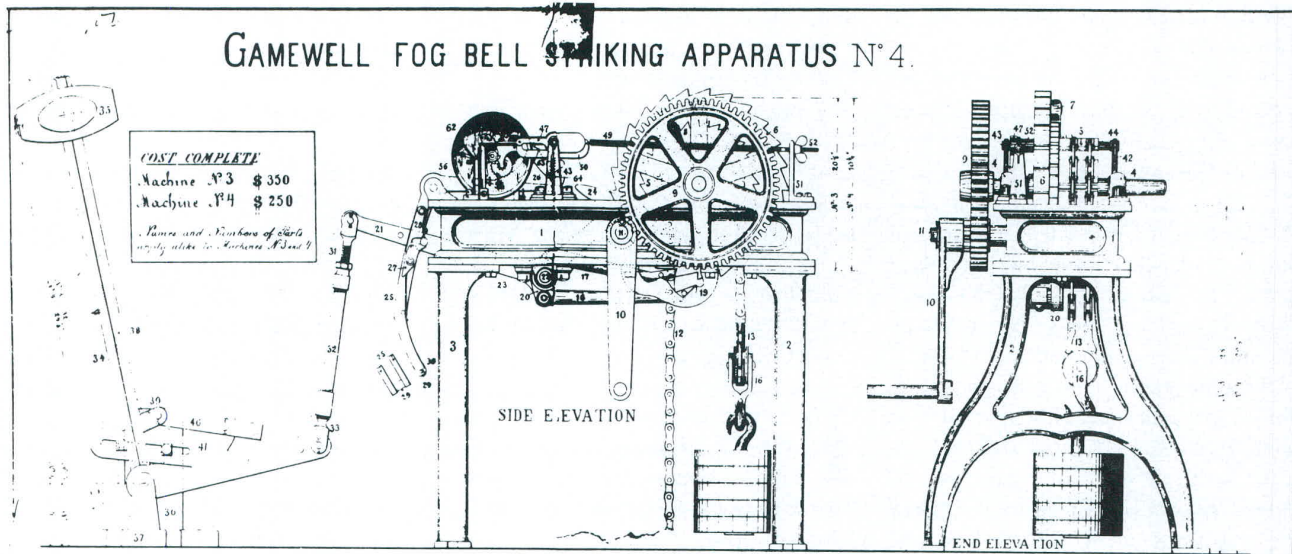
Front Elevation .

By keeping out of the red sector we cleared the black can buoy which marks the limits of the shoal making out from the south side, and its silhouette was plainly visible against the moonlit water on the left as the boats swept past. A few minutes later I was astonished to find the “Bunny” in the red sector again, and tried to steer her out of it; but a glance at the chart showed that it had to be passed through in order to enter the Patuxent. The sector is a trifle more than 90 degrees, and extends almost due east and south from Drum Point. As soon as we were well past the lighthouse the light turned white again.

As usual, a number of schooners were anchored between Drum Point and Solomon’s Island, and dim riding-lights shone in their rigging as we passed them.”

Drum Point Lighthouse also had a fog bell which weighed fourteen hundred pounds. The bell was sounded with “two blows at intervals of 15 seconds, during thick and foggy weather.” To produce these blows, the keeper had to hand-wind a weight driven mechanical bell striker every two hours. It took six hundred pounds of weight to drive the thirty-pound striker hammer. The bell is embossed “McShane Bell Foundry, Henry McShane and Co., Baltimore, Maryland, 1880.” At least one occupant reported that foxes came





down to the beach to bark at the fog bell on foggy nights.

On the night of August 20, 1883, the first keeper of Drum Point Lighthouse, Benjamin Gray, made his way up the stairs to the lantern room. Opening the door of the lens, he lighted the lamp and the first light pierced the darkness as it would each night for the next seventy-nine years.

To ensure that Keeper Gray ran his station correctly, the Lighthouse Board furnished him with the *Instructions to Light-Keepers* and other publications. Everything a keeper needed to know to run an efficient lighthouse could be found within the covers of the *Instructions*. In fact, his whole life aboard the station was contained within the pages of the book. For instance the *Instructions* stated that only “substantial and wholesome [food] . . . would be provided at the station” and “articles known as luxurious are forbidden to be provided” to the keeper.

Throughout its history the Lighthouse Service was inclined to be parsimonious. One old saying that runs:

*Use it up, wear it out,
Make it do, or do without*

could have been coined for the Service. John Hanson, keeper at Drum Point from 1942 to 1960, recalled that the U.S. Lighthouse Service required you

to keep paint brush handles and replace only the bristles. Old rags and the brass bases of light bulbs had to be returned in order to obtain replacements.

A keeper in 1919, while attempting to have telephone service installed at Drum Point, ran afoul of this quirk in the Service. Reams of correspondence passed between the keeper and the district office in Baltimore, with the keeper going as far as offering to pay for the telephone service out of his own funds. Finally, in 1923, the Service relented, but stipulated that the telephone be listed under Drum Point Lighthouse and that it was not to be used for “the convenience” of the keeper.

To a person of our hustle-bustle times, the life of a keeper might seem a simple, even idyllic, one. The popular image is one of an easy going life with time for peaceful reflection and contemplation. Perhaps some keepers did find this type of existence, but when describing their lives the words most often used by those that served at lighthouses were: *loneliness* and *monotony*. The daylight hours of a keeper were taken up with the mundane, but necessary, duties of keeping the station in working order. One may scan countless log entries and read nothing but “general cleaning,” “cleaning,” “painting,” and similar entries. One keeper at Drum Point, to fight the monotony and perhaps to get a little exercise, would run

around the lower gallery walkway, except when a ship hove into view. He explained he didn’t want the crew of a passing ship to “think I’d gone crazy.” While William Yeatman was keeper in 1910 he, his wife, or daughter would salute all the boats with three rings of the bell to help pass the monotony. Earl Harris raised beagles on the storage platform for the same reason.

Living conditions at Drum Point were not exactly ideal. A privy, built on the edge of the gallery walkway over the water, offered the only sanitary facilities. To obtain fresh water, rainwater was piped from the roof into four two-hundred gallon water cisterns located within the cottage. During dry spells the keeper was required to walk to the Barreda House located nearly a mile away on a hill and bring water back by the bucket. Clothes were washed in saltwater. Similar to most light stations, birds attracted to the light frequently crashed into the glass storm panes. During the fall and spring migration geese were a real problem. Extra panes of glass were kept on hand.

Keepers at Drum Point, as well as at most other stations, always faced the danger of fire due to the oil used for the lamp and heating and cooking purposes. Ice and storms were other destructive forces which were powerful

enemies of screwpile lighthouses in the Chesapeake.

A storm in 1933 is graphically described by Drum Point Keeper John J. Daley. Keeper Daley wrote to his superiors in Baltimore that a severe storm on August 23, 1933, with seas "at least 15 feet high," lashed the station and flooded all the rooms on the lower floor. The seas went across the lower deck, washed out a heavy concrete casing and ripped away and sank the station's small boat. The towering waves flung a large amount of driftwood with "one large tree lodged against [the] station, holding all other drift[wood] lodged against [it] for hours." True to the traditions of lighthouse keepers, Daley added that "I made every effort to save Station property but wind, tide,

and sea were against me." He then, matter-of-factly added, "Only way I have to get ashore is swim."

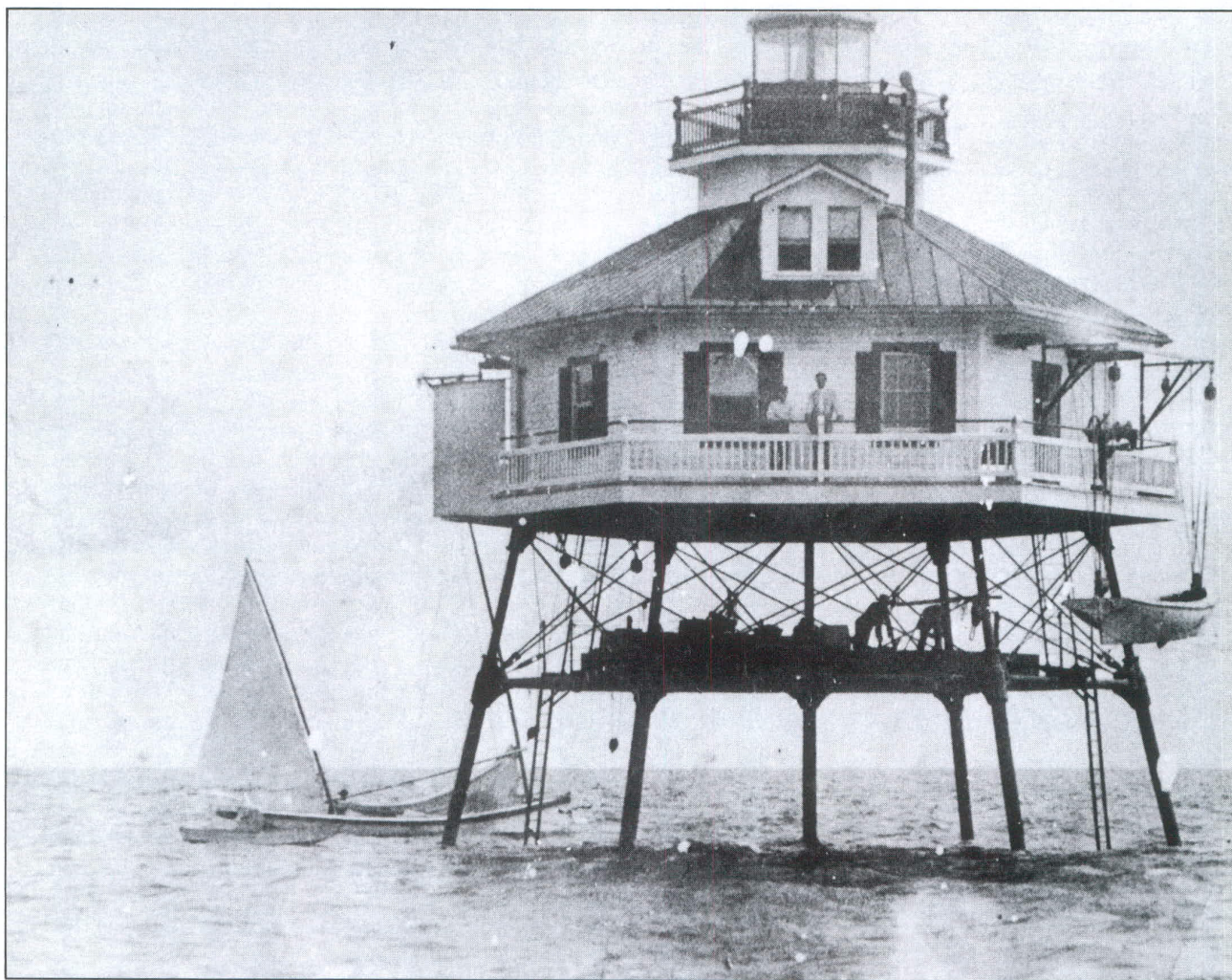
While Cale Stowe was keeper in the 1920s, he and his wife took the outboard motor boat to Solonons to shop at Webster's Store. While gone a fog came in and their daughter Myrtle couldn't get the fog bell striker mechanism to work. She and a friend dutifully rang the smaller saluting bell by hand until the keeper returned.

Isolation was not as drastic at Drum Point as at other stations. The thriving community of Solonons was only two nautical miles away, an easy row or sail for watermen in those days. On the nearby point, keepers frequently planted gardens in the spring.

At least one keeper kept chickens at the point for fresh eggs and by 1919 Keeper William Yeatman built a small wooden trestle from the lighthouse to the shore.

At least two children were born at the Drum Point station. Anna Weems Ewalt was born in July 1906 and Everett Yeatman around 1918. Keeper Weems had two daughters that died at the lighthouse, one at eighteen and the other only three years old. Their caskets were lowered into boats and taken to Solomons wharf. They were buried at Christ Church.

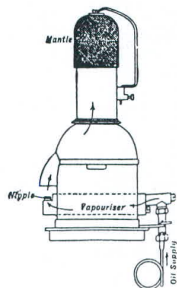
If a keeper was married his wife acted as an assistant keeper. This saved the Service from providing extra quarters. The wife of James L. Weems, who lived at Drum Point from October 1st,



Drum Point Lighthouse circa 1887. Note lack of ruby red glass panes in cupola, privy on left, men working on supply platform and structure surrounded by water. From post card dated 1887. Photo courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

1891, until April 20, 1918, acted as assistant keeper until December 1917, when she became too old “to remain at the station during the winter months.” Yet for all this long and faithful service, she was “not paid any compensation,” according to a report filed by a District Inspector.

Life continued in its even, albeit dull, pace for Drum Point and its keepers. To be sure, there were some changes: in 1932 the lighting apparatus was changed from an oil lamp to Incandescent Oil Vapor (I.O.V.) lamp to increase the candlepower and range. Sometime after 1939 the illuminator was converted to electrical power. Electricity made life easier for the keeper, but it also spelled the end to a long and traditional way of life. No longer would it be necessary for a person to stay awake all night to make sure lamps were burning and wicks trimmed. In 1939, the U.S. Lighthouse



Service was transferred to the U.S. Coast Guard, which began a formal program of automating lighthouses in the mid 1960s.

Nature, too, seems to have worked against the need for that station. Over the years the sandy spit known as Drum Point accreted toward the station. By the early 1960s the lighthouse, instead of being in ten feet of water 120 yards offshore, stood high and dry at low water. The end was near.

6 Sept 1962 Sta (ed. station) abandoned—New pile structure in com. (ed. commission) only 50 yds distant, marine site . . . Hdqtrs (ed. headquarters) to turn sta over to State of Md.

Thus, after seventy-nine years of service. Drum Point Lighthouse was abandoned and left to be ravished by the elements and vandals.

The Restoration of the Lighthouse

After Drum Point Lighthouse was replaced by an automated apparatus the property was transferred to the state of Maryland. The state made plans to restore the structure and open it to the public; but public access to the site by land was blocked by several miles of private property. With this complication, ownership passed back to the United States General Services Administration (GSA), which administers surplus U.S. Government property.

The lighthouse sat slowly deteriorating. The shifting of Drum Point deposited enough sand to make the site easily accessible by foot and, vandals soon began to do their work. John Hanson, Drum Point's last civilian keeper, who lived nearby, related that he avoided the Drum Point beach because he “could not bear to see the condition of the structure.”

In 1966 the Calvert County Historical Society undertook, as a special project, the acquisition and restoration of the lighthouse, little realizing the long uphill fight that lay ahead. To begin with, the society had to weave its way through the channels of local, state, and federal governments. “You never know the bureaucracy until you're up against it,” confided one official of the society.

Seven years later the society still had not been successful in obtaining ownership of the lighthouse. The group then sought to at least protect the structure having it placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Then, in 1974, came a sudden breakthrough. The Calvert County Historical Society was told it could have the Drum Point Lighthouse, but not the land it sat upon. Negotiations were quickly completed and with help from



Drum Point Lighthouse circa 1950. Note electric lines running to the structure. The lighthouse is now high and dry at low tide and easy prey for vandals. Photo courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

the Calvert County Government, on December 10, 1974, after more than a decade of work, the Drum Point Lighthouse became the property of the Calvert County Historical Society, and just in time. G. Walther Ewalt, then president of the society, related that “vandals have already set the lighthouse on fire, attempted to steal the large bell, stolen the brass lens stand and have ripped all doors from their hinges—even knocked out the railing. It looks terrible. . . .”

With a \$25,000 grant from the state of Maryland a contract was let to move the lighthouse in one piece two nautical miles upriver to the waterfront at Calvert Marine Museum. Fortunately, due to a bridge construction project near Solomons, the B. F. Diamond Construction Company of Savannah, Georgia, was in the vicinity.

Work on a new foundation for the lighthouse near the museum began in February of 1975. The work was hampered by bad weather, but workers kept at it until the foundation was ready one month later.

In March 1975 a barge with a steam operated crane and 110-foot boom was towed by a tug to Drum Point. The area around the lighthouse was

“backwashed” by the tug, its powerful screws churning a channel in the sand, allowing the crane to reach the now landlocked lighthouse.

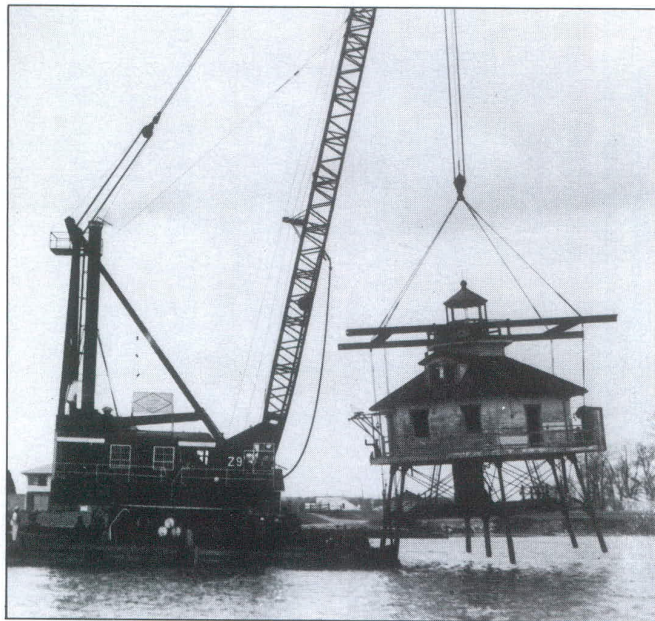
Once the barge was in position men with cutting torches began attacking the seven, ten-inch-diameter iron screw pilings. The cutters soon found that each piling was solid and not hollow as originally thought. The cutting torches burned through the day and lit up the Spring night with their glow. But it was not to be. Fatigue finally forced the workers to quit for the night. In the meantime bad weather and heavy seas forced the tugs and barge to return to Solomons. When the weather finally brightened early the next Saturday, the flotilla returned.

The steam crane, with its boom at a high angle, lowered a large, square I-beam spreader held by four cables. The rig descended over the lantern room almost touching the roof. Four lower cables were attached just below the cottage to the metal foundation pilings. Once all the tackle was attached, just as the last pilings were severed, the steam crane started the hoisting operations. Steam shot out of the stack, loud clanging noises were heard, and, as former keeper John Hansen and others watched, the Drum Point Lighthouse

slowly rose from her pilings, swaying only slightly as it came free. Two tugs from the construction company began to gently pull the barge, with the forty-one-ton lighthouse hanging from the crane, up river to her new home.

At the Calvert Marine Museum site a large crowd gathered to watch the event. After a half-hour trip the crane arrived and began the delicate job of lowering the lighthouse onto its new foundation. At last the Drum Point Lighthouse had found a protected site with public access.

Thanks to a donation from Richard H. Gamble the exterior of the structure was stabilized and protected from further harm. Now the work of restoration could begin in earnest. The National Park Service and Maryland Historical Trust provided funds for repairs or replacement of railings, downspouts, gutters, doors, windows, and portions of floors and walls which had been destroyed by vandals. The rotten lower supply platform was completely replaced and the exterior received a new coat of paint. Drum Point Lighthouse sparkled like she did on that day in 1883 when first placed in commission.



Steam-operated barge crane transporting Drum Point Lighthouse to Calvert Marine Museum, March 22, 1975. Photo courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.



The restored keeper's kitchen in the Drum Point Lighthouse. Calvert Marine Museum photo.

The interior restoration followed along the lines of the work on the outside: scraping, replacing, caulking and then painting. Anna Weems Ewalt, born in the lighthouse in 1906, served as an advisor on appropriate furnishings for the living quarters. Anna bent to her task with a will. Enlisting the aid of friends, they traveled throughout the region trying to obtain appropriate period furnishings and the results were most gratifying. Everything in the living quarters—from the pot-bellied stove to the bedspread and linens—were donated by Calvert County residents. Anna Ewalt donated her grandmother's china which was once used in the lighthouse. Mr. Hanson donated the chair he used while serving at the station. Today most of the equipment in the lighthouse is of period vintage. The original fourth order lens on display in the lantern room was obtained from the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland.

The original cost of the Drum Point Lighthouse totaled \$5,000 in 1883. The bill from the Diamond Construction Company to relocate the structure alone came to five times this amount. There were many other large expenses and a great deal of donated materials and labor.

On June 24, 1978, amid much fanfare and officialdom, the restored Drum Point Lighthouse was officially dedicated for all to enjoy. Maryland Governor Blair Lee cut the dedication ribbon.

Like the skipjacks that used to ply the waters of the Bay. The era of lighthouses and lighthousekeeping is slowly vanishing. Today on the Chesapeake there are only thirty-two lighthouses out of seventy-four that once dotted the area. The last two Coast Guard stations were automated in 1986, two are museums, two more are privately owned, and the remainder, for the most part, are abandoned and in ruins.

The dedication of the Calvert County Historical Society, the Calvert County Government, and the Calvert Marine Museum prevented the loss of the Drum Point Lighthouse. Without actual buildings, it is very easy to forget our past. Now the people of Maryland are able to see and understand a way of life that is fast disappearing. The restoration and preservation of Drum Point Lighthouse will preserve that way of life for future generations to enjoy.



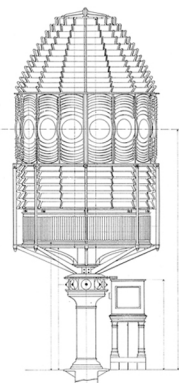
Restored Drum Point Lighthouse at the Calvert County Marine Museum on the bank of the Patuxent River. Photo courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

Drum Point Lighthouse Chronology

- 1853 Act of Maryland Legislature (March 3) cedes jurisdiction of site of Drum Point Light Station.
- 1854 Act of Congress (August 3) authorizes \$5,000 to build Drum Point Lighthouse.
- 1882 Act of Congress (August 7) authorizes \$25,000 for the building of two range lights at the mouth of the Patuxent River. The Lighthouse Board feels there is no need for two range lights and decides to construct one screwpile lighthouse.
- 1883 Construction of Drum Point Light begins on July 17 and is commissioned on August 20, with fixed red light.
- 1899 New model fourth-order lamp installed at Drum Point.
- 1909 Sometime prior to August 1, the light at Drum Point was changed from a fixed red to a fixed white with three red sectors.
- 1923 Bureau of Lighthouses, on March 5, approves installation of telephone at Drum Point.
- 1932 Office of Superintendent of Lighthouses approves change of illuminant at Drum Point from oil to incandescent oil vapor (I.O.V.) which increases light's range.
- 1933 Storm on August 24 isolates keeper, destroys much equipment.
- 1944 August 5, electrical power is installed.
- 1950 February 6, new 110 volt AC service and new 100 watt lamps installed at Drum Point.
- 1960 March 1, Drum Point Light is automated and station unmanned.
- 1962 September 6, Drum Point Light is decommissioned and replaced with new automated four-pile structure.
- 1973 April 11, Drum Point Lighthouse is placed on National Register of Historic Places.
- 1975 March 22, Drum Point Lighthouse is moved to Calvert Marine Museum waterfront.
- 1976 February 24, Drum Point Lighthouse is designated a Calvert County Historic District.
- 1978 June 24, official dedication of restored Drum Point Lighthouse.



Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today
or
Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society continues to donate to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. and is proud to have received the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

To learn more
visit www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255

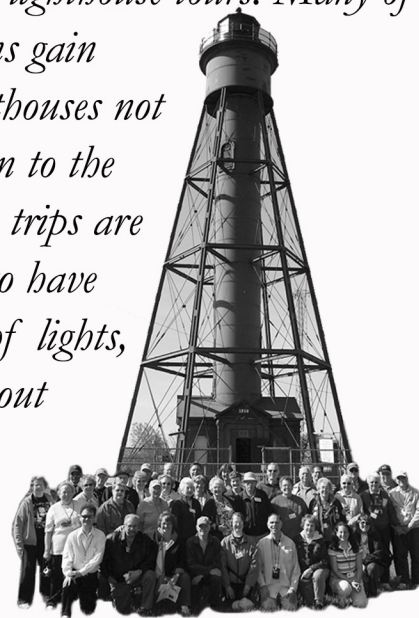
Help Support Our
Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log magazine has been publishing the rich history of lighthouses since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication quarterly as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights, and learn about lighthouse history.



Tincum Lighthouse, NJ