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PAUL BRADLEY

America's Oldest

Sandy Hook Lighthouse

by John Lopez

In the year 1764 an eight-year-old Mozart was entertaining the crowned heads of Europe, Beethoven would not be born for another six years, the signing of the Declaration of Independence was twelve years in the future, and America's oldest existing lighthouse was in its first year of operation. Although it was the fifth constructed in the colonies, it is the oldest surviving lighthouse in America. However, the origins of the lighthouse can be traced back to an earlier era.

Attempts were first made to establish a lighthouse on Sandy Hook in 1679 and 1680. During those years the Governor of New York, Sir

Edmund Andros suggested to Philip Carteret, Governor of East Jersey, that there was a need for "sea marks for shipping along Sandy Point," as Sandy Hook was then known. Nothing was done to construct these "sea marks" until 1746 when efforts were taken to protect shore property and provide for the safety of navigation.

France and Britain were at war and preyed upon the commerce of each other. New York merchants, fearful of French privateers entering New York Harbor, established a warning beacon near Sandy Hook as a defensive measure. When enemy vessels were sighted the beacon was to be lit. When the warning

light was seen, 15 miles across the water in New York City, the local militia would gather to defend the city. In actuality the beacon proved ineffectual as it was once lighted by mistake and went unnoticed in New York.

The need for a lighthouse on Sandy Hook persisted and on February 7, 1757 an article appeared in the *New York Post Boy* calling for construction of such a structure. The article suggested a plan for "erecting and maintaining a Lighthouse on Sandy Hook and a Residence for the Pilots at that Station." Again nothing resulted from that proposal.

Later that year the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (on December 15th) reported a shipwreck on Long Island and mentioned, "It is surprising that a Light House has not been built long before this Day at Sandy Hook." It was not until four years later that any progress was made.

After losing £20,000 (\$100,000 in 18th century dollars) the first three months of 1761 New York merchants joined together in another attempt to establish a lighthouse on Sandy Hook. On March 13, 1761 forty-three prominent merchants of the city petitioned Lieutenant Governor Caldwell Colden, President of His Majesty's Council of New York, stressing the need for a light at the entrance to New York Harbor. He was asked to request permission from his superiors to establish a lighthouse, a house for pilots, and authority to levy tax on the shipping that entered New York.

Colden, after reading this letter realized the need for such a lighthouse and agreed with the merchants. An April 3, 1761 statement presented to the New York Provincial Council states:

"The Erecting a Convenient Building for a Light-House near Sandy Hook is an Object so worthy of your consideration, and a Provision for it, so essential to the Welfare of our commercial interests, and the Preservation of a very useful Part of the community, that I cannot avoid recommending the Memorial I received on the Subject of your closest Attention."

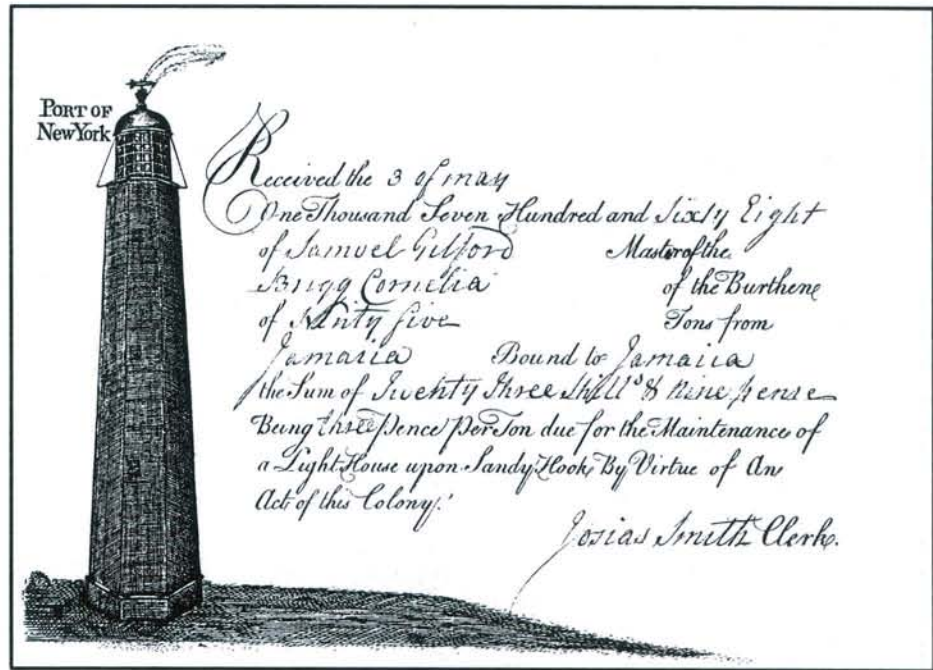
The site chosen for the structure consisted of four acres of sandy ground that was owned by Esik and Richard Hartshorne. The actual price the brothers asked is unclear. Some accounts state the price was £1000, other accounts state £750 sterling. Regardless of the actual amount the merchants considered it too high and construction was delayed until a compromise could be reached.

On May 9, 1762 the New York

Assembly authorized a lottery to provide £3000 sterling to secure ownership of the desired property and to help with construction costs. A total of 10,000 tickets were sold at forty shillings each. 1,684 were winners and 8,316 blank. Tickets sold so quickly that the original drawing date of November 2nd was moved up to September 30th.

the Port of New York, to collect three pence a ton from ships passing the lighthouse and sailing into the harbor. Money collected was then used by the Port of New York, it being the owner of the lighthouse, to purchase supplies (oil, tallow, coal, etc.) and for the keepers' pay.

Ship captains had to report to Mr. Smith within forty-eight hours of



Lighthouse Tax Receipt. The Master of a ship received this tax receipt for "using" Sandy Hook Lighthouse. It was based on the tonnage of his cargo.

The initial sum raised proved inadequate so a second lottery was authorized to raise an additional £6000. Half was directed to finishing construction of the lighthouse. The second lottery, authorized on December 11th, 1762 was held on June 14th, 1763 under the inspection of members of the Corporation of New York City. Ownership of the property was later transferred to the federal government in 1790 under authority of the 9th Act of Congress.

A third means of generating revenue to defray expenses was the imposition of a tonnage tax on vessels entering New York Harbor. Authorization was given on December 20th, 1763 which enabled Jonias Smith, clerk of the Master and Wardens of

docking or face a penalty of an additional 10% tax. This tonnage tax proved adequate to pay for the operation of the lighthouse. During the first year expenses were £431 and the tax brought in £487. In the second year £451 was collected while expenses were only £407.

Originally called the New York Lighthouse, Sandy Hook Lighthouse was first lighted on June 11th, 1764. The following article appeared in the June 18th, 1764 edition of *The New York Mercury*:

"On Monday Evening last the New York Lighthouse erected at Sandy Hook was lighted for the first time. The House is of an Octagonal Figure, having eight equal sides; the Diameter



An 1804 chart of New York Bay. Sandy Hook Lighthouse can be seen in the lower center of the chart. The soundings of the depth of water are in fathoms. (One fathom equals six feet.) Notice that there are two buoys depicting the entrance to the bay and a few more to guide the mariner into New York City.

at the Base is 29 Feet and at the top of the Wall 15 Feet. The lanthorn is 7 Feet high; the circumference 33 Feet. The whole constructure of the Lanthorn is Iron; the top covered with copper. There are 48 Oil Blazes. The Building from the surface is Nine Stories; the whole from the Bottom to Top 103 Feet."

"This structure was undertaken by Mr. Isaac Conro of this city, and was carried on with all of the Expedition that the Difficulty attending to and fro on the Occasion could possibly admit of; and is judged to be masterly finished."

Isaac Conro, mason and builder, had a business near the Oswego Market in New York City. He also was a merchant who sold fire clay, sand marble chimney pieces, tile, iron backs, bottom and side plates, stone lime, and "brass wire wove fit for pantries and daries to keep out flies."

The following construction costs of the lighthouse were taken from a bill listing expenses:

"blacksmiths (Robert Boyd) bill for the lantern, £550; 203 casks of lime, £206; timber and boards for the house, £210; brick and sheet lead, \$90; stone, £378; freight of material, £632; sheet copper and wire, \$138; copper-smiths, \$88; artificers and laborers, \$1,623; dieting workmen, \$649; rum and sugar for the men, and molasses for cement, \$126; four oxen, one horse and two carts, \$107; two boats, provender, ironmongery, nails, polisropes, etc., \$473. This minus \$221 for sundry articles left, the total amounted to \$5,119."

Sandy Hook Lighthouse suffered its first major damage from a storm in 1766. The June 30th *New York Mercury* reported:

"The 26th Instant, the Lighthouse at Sandy Hook was struck by Lightning, and twen-

ty panes of the Glass Lanthorn broke to pieces; the chimney and Porch belonging to the kitchen was broke down, and some people that were in the House received a little Hurt, but are since recovered. 'Tis said the Gust was attended with a heavy shower of Hail."

On June 22, 1776 Lawrence Hartwick, carpenter with the Royal Navy measured the lighthouse and gives the following dimensions:

"ground floor, floor 14 feet 9 inches wide, wall 6 feet 4 inches thick, height 9 feet 8 inches; first story, floor 13 feet 10 inches wide, wall 5 feet 10 inches thick, height 10 feet; second story, floor 13 feet 8 inches wide, wall 5 feet 2 inches thick, height 10 feet; third story, floor 12 feet 10 inches wide, wall 4 feet 8 inches thick, height 9 feet 9 inches; fourth story, floor 12 feet wide, wall 3 feet 6 inches thick, height 9 feet; fifth story, floor 11 feet 4 inches wide, wall 3 feet thick, height 9 feet 10 inches; sixth story, floor 10 feet 8 inches wide, wall 2 feet 6 inches thick, height 8 feet 9 inches; lanthorn or top, floor 10 feet wide, wall 2 feet thick, height 8 feet 9 inches."

He went on to give the following distances:

"From the Ground where the Enemy fired two Field Pieces, Six Pounders on the Light House, the 21st June 1776, 268 yards; from the lighthouse to the end of the first meadow, 525 yards; from the end of the first meadow to the cedars, 210 yards; total distance from the lighthouse to the cedars, 735 yards."

A controversy exists regarding the height of the lighthouse. The 1764 height from the base to the lanthorn is given as 85 feet, while the 1838 height is listed as 75 feet. This discrepancy can be traced back to the Revolutionary War as the lighthouse was in the midst of a great



Sandy Hook Lighthouse in 1790 by I. Anderson, engraved by Cornelius Tiebout. There appears to be wire mesh around the lantern room. It might have been installed to prevent birds from smashing the storm panes at night.

(Courtesy of the New York Public Library.)

deal of military activity and was indeed a military objective. At different times both British and Colonial forces occupied the lighthouse as each side wished to control navigation into the harbor.

Accounts vary as to what occurred, but no conclusive evidence exists to confirm or deny whether the lighthouse was damaged by cannon fire from the local militia (while under British occupation). Perhaps the confusion results from Lawrence Hartwick's statement regarding "distances" where he states, "from the Ground where the Enemy fired two Field Pieces, Six Pounders on the Light House..."

Another version has the British destroying the upper part of the tower prior to occupying the structure. Colonists used the tower to observe British naval activity offshore. In an attempt to stop this, British troops fired upon the beacon rendering it unusable by

shooting off the lantern. This account seems unlikely since the British needed the lighthouse both as a day and night mark to guide their vessels into the bay.

Most evidence seems to suggest that while under British control seamen from a local merchant fleet under the command of Major William Malcolm found their way into the tower and dismantled the lightning apparatus. In a letter dated March 6, 1776 Major Malcolm received orders to render the lantern inoperative:

"Upon your arrival at Sandy Hook you will endeavor to take the glass out of the lantern, and save it if possible; but if you find this impracticable you will break the glass. You will also endeavor to pump the oil out of the cisterns into casks or, not being able to procure casks, you will pump it out onto the ground. In short, you will use your best discretion to render the lighthouse entirely useless."

It appears these orders were carried out as a letter addressed to Colonel George Meade dated March 12 states:

"Received from Wm. Malcolm eight copper lamps, two tackle falls and blocks, and three casks, and a part of a cask of oil, being articles from the lighthouse on Sandy Hook."

The British repaired the lantern, replaced the optic and reactivated the lighthouse on June 1st, 1776. A local militia returned to the lighthouse a few weeks later and tried to destroy it once more with cannon fire "but found the walls so firm that the cannon fire could make no impression." Thus, a conclusion could be drawn that the measurements previously given as to height were in error.

Sandy Hook lighthouse remained a British garrison for most of the war, housing troops of the regular army and British sympathizers. Originally called New Jersey Royal Volunteers, these Tories and refugees

used the lighthouse as their command post while conducting raids on local towns and farms. As a result the lighthouse became known as "Lighthouse Fort" or the "Refugees' Tower." Sandy Hook later became a mooring for the Royal Navy.

Toward the end of the war a number of Royal Naval vessels were sent to remove troops from the New York area. While awaiting the evacuation they anchored in the bay across from the lighthouse. This set the scene for one of the more interesting Sandy Hook Lighthouse tales.

One such ship at anchor off Sandy Hook was *HIS MAJESTY'S SHIP ASSISTANCE*, a medium-sized man-of-war having 50 guns and a displacement of 1,053 tons. On December 31, 1783 a number of crewmen deserted. An account of the incident by a crewmember appeared in the *Scot Magazine*, March 1784:

"On the 31st (1783) about 3:00 six seamen of this ship being sent in the longboat, under command of a midshipman, to fetch water casks from Bridgewater transport, at anchor a little astern, the men overpowered the midshipman, cut the rope they were again to be hauled ahead by and made for the Jersey shore."

First Lieutenant Douglas Halyburton, Royal Navy; Lieutenant James Champion, Royal Marines; Midshipman Robert Wood along with eleven seamen were sent to apprehend the deserters. Shortly after they got underway a blizzard hit the area and capsized the barge. The entire detachment died of exposure. A crew member describes later events:

"I never was present at so mournful an affair in my life as yesterday... I attended their funeral to the light-house where they were buried with the honors of war, in one grave, tho' in ten different coffins, followed by the officers and marines of the ship... A most melancholy and awful procession."

Halyburton's mother, Katherine Dowager Countess of Morton, Pittcurr, Scotland later erected a monument to the entire detachment about one mile south of the lighthouse between 1785 and 1788. This monument was later destroyed by French sailors in 1808 but was replaced in 1939. She also had the bodies removed from the "Ocean Cemetery" site near the lighthouse and reburied at a site along the bay where they had washed ashore.

The exact date of the Argon lamp/parabolic reflector installation is uncertain but most lighthouses were equipped with this apparatus as early as 1812. A third order Fresnel lens was installed in 1856 and is still in use today.

The structure was reported to be in very good condition during 1851. Lt. David D. Porter of the U.S. Mail Steamer *GEORGIA* reported:

"As the Sandy Hook Lighthouse and beacons are intended as a guide up the bay I consider them as well kept and I have always seen them showing a clear bright light; I think they compare favorably with any harbor lights that I have seen in foreign countries."

However, one year later the U.S. Lighthouse Board conducted an official inspection and noted:

"The lights are not lighted at sunset, and kept burning until sunrise in compliance with instructions. The keeper uses his own discretion in this matter, generally lighting about dusk and extinguishing at daylight.... The inside walls of the tower had been recently white-washed, but two years had elapsed since the outside had been done.... The keeper stated that the oil last year was bad; the winter oil was cut, in cold weather, with a knife.... The keeper is not instructed in the manner of adjusting the apparatus, and had entered upon his duties without previous instructions...."

The structure underwent a major refurbishing in 1857. Repairs included the installation of a brick lining reinforcing the original rubblestone exterior along with the installation of iron stairs and floors. A new keepers residence was constructed in 1883 which currently houses national Park Service personnel.

Sandy Hook is located within the confines of Port Hancock, a deactivated coastal artillery fortification constructed in 1890. The light was extinguished during both World Wars. With the threat of air attack an unusual paint scheme adorned the tower during the second World War. Fearful of aerial observation the tower was painted in a camouflage pattern to obscure it from enemy sight. The lighthouse was automated in the early 1950s and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1964.

Although located on National Park Service property the lighthouse is owned and maintained by the U.S. Coast Guard. Located within the Third Coast Guard District in position 40° 27' 39" North, 73° 59' 49" West, it is a fixed third order white light (45,000 candlepower) visible 19 miles at sea.

John Lopez is a historical interpreter for the National Park Service at Sandy Hook and for the State of New Jersey at the historic Twin Lights of Navesink.



TOP LEFT: A close-up of the Sandy Hook Lighthouse lantern room. Note the eagle head rain spouts and the hand grip. The handle was for the keeper to hang on to while standing on a ladder and cleaning the storm panes.

(Photo by author.)

TOP RIGHT: Sandy Hook circa 1890. The small building in front of the tower is an oil house. When kerosene oil came into use in the 1870's, the lighthouse service constructed small brick oil houses at each light station.

(National Archives photo.)

BOTTOM: Unearthing the Halyburton Vault in 1908. The burial vault of the British sailors was discovered during the installation of coastal defense fortifications.

(Chinook Archives photo.)



Sandy Hook, December 10, 1892.

Captain Sleygh,
Light-House Inspector,
Third District.

Sir:—

I am sorry that I have to call on you, but I am tired of the profane abuse of the keeper. I have taken it for over two years without saying anything before. He is the most profane man at times that I ever heard talk; he has cursed me and called me very vile names a grate many times for no good cause whatever, and if there is any way of stoping it I would like to have it done. I dont want you to injure the man in any way for he has a large family to support, and a nice family to. I only want his abuse stoped.

I think he will tell you that I am not able to do the work here, but I do more than my share of the regular work and have done it all the time. Captain if you can give me one of the small lights to tend I would feel very grateful to you for I would like to be by myself and away from this man. Should there a vacancy occur on Stattan Island or on the N Jerse Shore I would consider it a grate favor if you would give it to me. I am the man Mr. West spoke to you about who lost a leg at the Battle of Coal Harbor.

Charles A. Brewer,
Assistant keeper, Hook Beacon,
Sandy Hook.

January 25th, 1893

Subject: North Hook Beacon—discipline.

Mr. William Stanton,
Keeper,
North Hook Beacon.

Sir:—

The fact that you and your assistant-keeper are on bad terms has been reported to me by the Assistant Inspector. If either has cause for complaint against the other, the remedy lies in reporting the offence to the Inspector, not in an interchange of abusive language. The assistant has been instructed that he must comply with the Regulations of the Light-House Establishment and obey the lawful orders of the keeper, but you and he are strongly admonished that quarreling, under any circumstances, will not be allowed.

Very respectfully,
Sleygh,

Commander, U.S.N.,
Inspector.