

# The General Light-House Depot Reborn

By Mike Vogel and Candace Clifford



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The Tompkinsville Depot in 1912. National Archives photo.



ver the past century and a half, a slice of lighthouse history on the Staten Island waterfront, just across New York Harbor from lower Manhattan, has seen its fortunes rise and fall. Now, it may again be on the rise—and back in the service of lighthouses.

The General Light-House Depot in Tompkinsville is reopening this summer as the long-delayed National Lighthouse Museum. The National Lighthouse Day ceremony will unveil a small “starter” museum that has yet to reach the scope of the facility envisioned by the national lighthouse community some 16 years ago, but it could be a milestone event that marks a beginning for realizing that vision. And in the process, it brings lighthouses back to what once was the central national supply, testing, and distribution center for all the lighthouses of the United States.

Time and decay nearly claimed this lighthouse site, one that is rich in American

history. Now, it will help retell its story to a new generation.

That story starts even before the Light-House Board moved in in 1863. As early as 1799, the Staten Island shoreline was home to a quarantine station and, eventually, a saint.

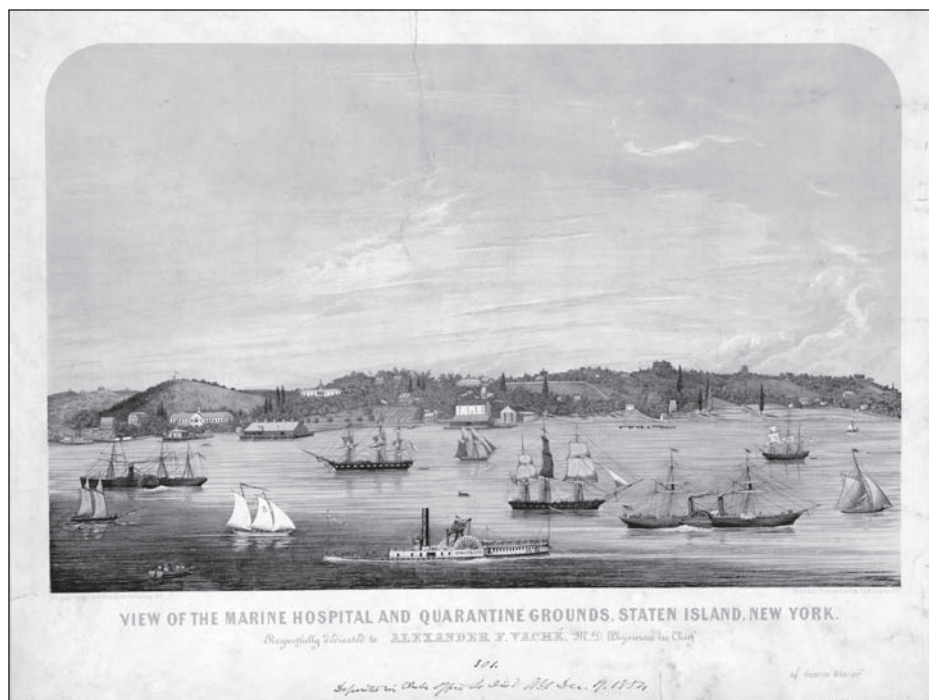
The saint was Elizabeth Seton, whose father ran the Marine Hospital used to isolate diseased sailors and passengers arriving in New York. He would die there of yellow fever, but she would go on to convert to Catholicism, found the parochial school system, and eventually be canonized as the first American-born saint. The hospital, which shared space with the quarantine-enforcing U.S. Revenue Cutter Service from 1814, would go on to become the site of a needed lighthouse service “super depot” during the Civil War.

The U.S. Light-House Board assigned its chairman, Admiral William B. Shubrick, and its scientist, Professor Joseph Henry, to find a place for “a facility to receive and test

or inspect all oil, lenses and supplies before transferring these materials to the various district depots.” The site had to be convenient to transatlantic shipping and to distribution routes throughout the country, as it would not only receive European-made lenses but centralize much of the work that was being done by the depots of the dozen Lighthouse Districts in the service.

New York was an easy choice, and the Marine Hospital’s planned move to a new site made harbor-front land available. In 1863 Congress appropriated \$50,000 for the project at the quarantine station site, and a year later the board asked for—and eventually got—the Revenue Cutter Service wharf and grounds as well. By 1867 the site was completely in the control of the Light-House Board. Acting Third District Lighthouse Engineer Joseph M. Lederle had conveyed a plan for the new depot to the board, and what would become a continuing round of construction projects was under way.

The main building on the site was a



View of the Marine Hospital and quarantine grounds. Library of Congress photo.

large stone and brick structure now called the Barracks Building, from its usage in the 1940s. But the building itself dates probably to 1864, and maybe earlier—its Greek Revival style was popular in the area in the 1840s and 1850s, and it might have been a Revenue Cutter Service building. But the next-oldest surviving structures came from the Lighthouse Service: a series of large underground oil vaults, built from 1867 on, as the distribution of illuminating apparatus and supplies was moved from Manhattan.

Other buildings would follow, along with wharves, roadways, storage and coal sheds, tramways, fences, and the like. Boat basins were dredged, bulkheads built, shoreline land filled and graded, and fences erected. One thing soon became apparent: there was not enough room, and maybe never would be.

“Although it was expected that the business of the depot would be large, it has far exceeded the expectations, and it was demonstrated that there was neither sufficient room nor facilities to insure the best practical results or to answer all the demands made upon the depot,” notes the service’s *Annual Report* for 1867. More land was added, more buildings were planned, and the depot was tasked with “testing oils offered by contractors and for experimenting with lamps, apparatus, etc., used in the service.”

That necessitated a small laboratory in

addition to the oil vaults being constructed to hold the thousands of gallons of sperm oil—and eventually lard oil and mineral oil—needed for the nation’s lighthouses. Where once that supply flowed directly from merchants to the districts, the depot now would offer a central point to check on quality and dole out amounts calculated from the usage rates of the various lamps and lens arrangements at each lighthouse.



Tenders and lightships at the south dock of the General Depot in 1912. National Archives photo.

Five of the masonry vaults, built for maximum safety and security, were 51 feet long, 21 feet wide, and 13 feet high; a sixth was half that size. The caverns were covered with lands and plantings, with only heavy doors piercing the hillside and opening onto a paved area behind the depot buildings. The vaults were equipped with large cast-iron, tin-lined storage casks, and barrel storage platforms with shallow iron trays to catch any possible spillage. Still surviving, the vaults were envisioned by the museum as full-immersion lighthouse educational experience venues; their actual reuse at this writing remains uncertain.

Engineers weren’t just looking at the land, however. Lederle’s 1867 report also notes that “the most important and most needed improvement of the Depot is the establishment of a safe harbor for the Tenders and the vessels connected with the Light House Service. Plans are in course of preparation to carry out the suggestion contained in the report by the Committee on Engineering on the subject of rendering the basin a safe harbor.”

In 1867 and 1868, the board also approved the construction of the still-standing building now known as the Original Lamp Shop, another Greek Revival-style structure with a unique and interesting characteristic. On the south side of the building, the engineers constructed a double-height open room with pits, ladders, and iron columns so that lampists could assemble and test even the largest size lenses and pedestals

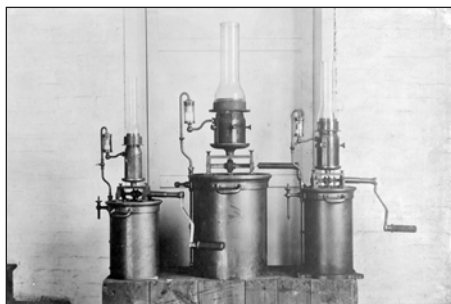


A searchlight pierces the night sky from the depot in 1921. National Archives photo.

with access from both floors of the rest of the building. Four two-story arched windows provided light, and the construction plans for the rest of the site allowed the service to consolidate even more functions there.

The Third District Engineer's report for 1868 offered the satisfying news that "in December last the inspector's office in New York City was broken up and removed to this depot, greatly to the advantage of the service, because that portion of the duties of the inspector of the district relating to the receipt, overhauling, repairing, and shipment of illuminating apparatus and stores for general use has been brought directly under his supervision. The change has given him a better control of the tender, as well as brought him more directly into contact with the whole light-house system."

"There are employed in the workshop



Lamps awaiting shipment. National Archives photo.

for the manufacture and repair of lamps, apparatus, implements, and all accessories of light stations, one foreman, seven lampists, one machinist, one laborer, and for the general work of the depot in the receipt, packing and delivery of stores, keeping the grounds in order and caring for the public property, one foreman, two watchmen, eleven laborers."

Fresnel lenses, still new to at least America, also were flowing through the depot. In 1868, 38 new ones were received and a total 51 packed and shipped after testing. The depot also manufactured 185 lamps and repaired another 87.

And the oil vaults were nearing their 1869 completion, which allowed the handling and storage of 85,000 gallons of oil, 50,000 of that in the five large tanks and the rest in rows of barrels.

Office buildings and sheds continued to go up and the wharves continued to be strengthened. From 1869 to 1871, the still-standing administration building was completed—in a mansard-roofed French Second Empire style, breaking with the Greek Revival tradition of the two earlier buildings to either side. In 1872 two derricks were erected on the wharves, and that year's *Annual Report* notes that "this depot contains the manufacturing establishment, vaults for the storage, and apparatus for photometrical tests, of oil, and storehouses for the general supplies, etc., for the service of the lights in

the Atlantic, Pacific, Gulf and Great Lakes coasts of the United States."

In 1879 some of the site's illuminant experimentation was leading to changes throughout the Lighthouse Service. For the first half of that year it was business as usual in the testing of lamps and burners for the conversion from lard to mineral oil, but during the last half the service reported that "there has been greater activity in the shops and manufacturing departments, in consequence of the change of the illuminant in the light-house service to mineral oil and the demand for mineral oil lamps to meet the change. For the transportation of this mineral oil many thousands of oil cans, properly made and cased in pine boxes, have been manufactured, and a large number have been delivered to the inspector's department for supplying the mineral oil."

It was a busy place. In 1880 the depot made more than 21,000 cans for transporting oil and 27,000 wooden boxes for the cans. The lamp shop turned out more than 1,500 mineral oil lamps, which were "sent to the different light-house districts to replace lard-oil lamps."

Conveniences like lamp-shop freight elevators and city water supplies were being added, along with better machinery and



Unmanned, minor aids to navigation ready for shipment. National Archives photo.



Center, Depot administration building prior to addition of two wings. At right, original quarantine building, later used for storage. Left, the original lamp shop. National Archives photo.

increased storage capacity. By 1884 the district had proven that, despite burning more hotly than lard-oil lamps, mineral oil could be used in the larger lenses. "The use of mineral oil for first and second order lamps having proved to be practicable, the manufacture of these lamps was kept well up in the lamp shop, and the various first-order stations were supplied with the new apparatus as fast as the mineral oil lamps could be manufactured," the service reported.

The changeover made a dramatic difference in the oil vaults; by 1890 the depot would receive 278,284 gallons of mineral oil and ship out 308,325, compared to only 4,998 gallons of lard oil received and 4,441 shipped. But even the mineral oil already was in doubt; in 1884, the same year that fuel was approved for large lenses, the depot also erected an iron tower "fitted for experimenting with the electric light as a light-house illuminant." The tower, which stood for 13 years, used power from a boilerhouse "engine" or generator; a first-order lens "for electric use" was received from Europe and a "full supply" of both European and American electric apparatus was ordered for testing.

The depot's entry in the 1891 *Annual Report* gives a glimpse of the bustle:

The work done here in the engineer's department during the year consisted, as usual, of manufacturing and repairing lamps, supplies, fitting illumina-

ting apparatus, making oil cans and boxes for supplying oil to light stations, manufacturing light-house and light-ship lanterns, receiving material for manufacturing and repair work, repairing frames, etc., for light-houses, oil-houses, and other structures, repairing buoys and appendages, and general works of repair, etc., for the district.

The work done in the inspector's department consisted of receiving, storing, and shipping building materials, illuminating apparatus, supplies, buoys, and fuel; testing paints, chimneys, and oils; inspecting and weighing provisions and general stores; loading and unloading the supply steamer and tenders; cleaning and repairing buoys and appendages; repairing tenders and boats; making sails, awnings, and the like and improving the methods and means of storing, inspecting, and handling the supplies and keeping the accounts of the same.

The more special work done at the depot was the outfitting and equipment of the supply steamer *Armeria*, the tender *Azalea*, and the new light-ship No. 48 for Sandy Hook, to prepare them for service. These operations, embracing the final changes, additions, and adjustments which all new vessels require, called for and received the labor and materials which the shops and stores of the depot were able to supply.

The need for enlarging the facilities of the depot for the reception, handling, and care of supplies, oil, and other stock is more pressing every year, until now it is imperative to provide larger and better accommodations.

By 1893 "The lamp shop is overcrowded with work; the storehouses are crowded beyond their capacity; the grounds are encumbered



Some of the workers pose in front of the depot. National Archives photo.

to an extent which impedes easy movement. These defects mean that the establishment is steadily running behind because the depot cannot keep up with its demands; they mean that materials must be moved and removed, that supplies must be handled and rehandled, and thus that much money is wasted. The need for enlarging the facilities of the depot for the reception, handling, and care of supplies, oil, and other stock is more pressing than ever.”

Overcrowding and pleas for more space continued through the next several years, but in 1893 the depot did find time for another special assignment: assembling a display of lenses, lamps, and other gear to send to the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. And by 1895 the depot, which also served as the headquarters of the Third Lighthouse District, was lighted by electricity from its own power house in the yard, while the shops and stores were heated by steam.

The service reported:

The lenses from abroad are received, set up, and tested. The clock work for small lenses and fog signals, and the reflectors, lamps, lanterns, burner, oil cans, etc., are all made at the depot, as well as the important repairs to illuminating apparatus of the service.

Building materials for repairs are kept on hand. Supplies are received, weighed, tested, stored, and shipped, as required, to all parts of the service. Similar work is performed with respect to buoys, chains, anchors, ballast balls, and other articles of outfit and supply for floating aids.

All the machinery for fog signals is set up and tested before use. Boxes are made, boats are built, vessels repaired, sailmakers and painters are kept busy, and the blacksmith and lamp shops are constantly at work.

Under the direction of the inspector, the operations at this depot . . . included . . . contributing labor, material, and transportation in the work of laying the new system of electric buoys in the lower bay, and of effecting communication by telephone between Scotland light-ship and Sandy Hook.”

In 1899 the depot was experimenting with “gasoline engines, acetylene and other apparatus.” But the lamp shop was “so crowded with machinery and workmen that it is not practicable to increase the present force, which is inadequate to meet the demands of the service, so it often happens that important and urgent work has to be delayed for lack of facilities to attend to it,” officials lamented.

In 1901 a new wing was added to the administration building and Congress appropriated \$25,000 for that, other repairs, and the erection of a new lamp shop. That building would be built in 1907 and 1908, a plain structure with lots of natural light, a south-facing courtyard, and room not only for a lamp shop but for machine shops, packing rooms, a blacksmith shop, tin shops, and storage. That building now is the next possible expansion of the new lighthouse museum.

The future also was intruding in another way: in 1904, the city of New York asked

Congress to sell a strip of depot land to allow the building of an approach to a ferry terminal. The Staten Island Ferry, which docks next to the depot site, would become a New York icon, but the terminal would seriously impact the depot site.

In 1912 a new machine shop also was added to the depot. Today, it is the smallest of the five surviving buildings, not counting the oil vaults. And it is the first exhibit space for the National Lighthouse Museum.

The depot itself would continue to play a central role in the lighthouse system through the rest of the Lighthouse Service years and into the Coast Guard era, testing equipment in its own lighthouse on the grounds and serving as a home port for tenders and lightships. In the 1920s, it had 200 employees and uniformed guards. In 1939, with the absorption of the Lighthouse Service by the Coast Guard, it became a Coast Guard base and served in that role until the Coast Guard relocated to Governor's Island in 1966.

That year saw the demolition of a dozen depot buildings to make way for a new maintenance facility for the Staten Island ferries, a huge structure that still dominates much of the site. But the demolition, in turn, triggered local protests and community concern about the historic old site that mounted until, in 1991, a Coast Guard Base Task Force was formed to consider the waterfront future.

The short-term result was amendment of the ferry maintenance building design and construction of an Esplanade with a pedestrian bridge link and sculptures. More



Aerial views of the depot in 1945 (left) and 1963 (above). U.S. Coast Guard photos.

recently, a new baseball park for the Staten Island Yankees was built on the other side of the ferry terminal, and there are plans for a large ferris wheel, the New York Wheel, in that area. On the depot side, various development plans surfaced through the years as nearby warehouses were converted to residential complexes with dramatic views of

Manhattan and the harbor; in 2001 residents had a horrifying front-row view of the fall of the World Trade Center towers just across the water.

That history-changing moment also had its impact on the depot. In 1998 a steering committee formed of lighthouse community leaders from across the country met to consider the desirability and feasibility of a National Lighthouse Museum, eventually inspecting six different locations before settling on the old depot on Staten Island. That announcement was made in the expectation that substantial fund-raising would be possible in the New York metro area—but the 9/11 attacks soon changed that.

Other reasons for the selection, though, remain valid; for example, the site is easily accessible by many modes of transportation and it is in a major population center with hundreds of school systems within field-trip distance. But there was yet another reason in the hearts and minds of steering committee members: the hope of saving what was left of the historic old depots.

The buildings were in rapid, and advanced, decay. They were visited by vagrants and vandals, and roofs were gaping open. If nothing had been done, at least some of the structures would have been lost within a few more years.

The museum site selection changed that. Stabilization work, es-



**U.S. Coast Guard lampist assembles a lens, circa early 1960s. U.S. Coast Guard photo.**

pecially on the roofs, was launched quickly with city and borough support. Although subsequent development negotiations were complicated and difficult, and at least the initial plans were scaled back to fit the available funding, the buildings themselves were saved.

It is likely that some of the historic structures will become museum space, and others will be targeted for adaptive reuse. That part of the future remains murky, even as the site's history once more becomes clear.

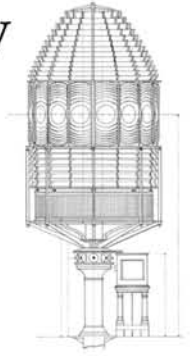
That history is a key motivator for National Lighthouse Museum Director Linda Dianto and her volunteer board, which conducted an aggressive and ultimately successful fund-raising campaign to meet the city Economic Redevelopment Agency's challenge goal for opening the museum. That money can be used for machine shop renovation and exhibit construction. This summer's launch, to them, is not just a look at the possibilities. It's a start.



Lampists work to (top) repair glass in a lens, (middle) attach a sun valve to a lens, (bottom) fit a dark sector to a third-order lens. U.S. Lighthouse Service photos from 1930 courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.



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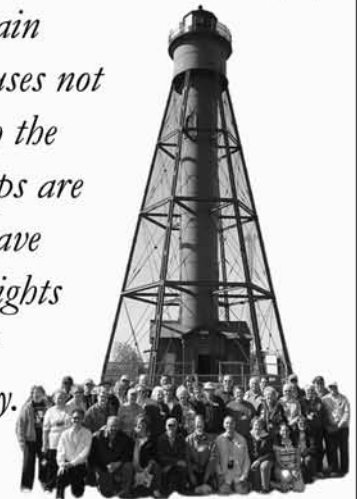
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