

Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse

By Wayne Wheeler



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, photographed by Major Jared Smith at 6 a.m., August 18, 1885. National Archives photo (26-LG-25-54).

The Chesapeake Bay, at 180 miles in length, is one of the great protected waterways of the country. Because of its natural configuration it became the home of many of our earliest ports of call: Norfolk, Portsmouth, Annapolis, Baltimore and, farther up the Potomac, Alexandria and Washington. These were all bustling seaports early in the beginning of our nation.

But for all its size, Chesapeake Bay is shallow in many areas, with limited deep water channels. The need for aids to navigation was evident early on, yet the government was slow to respond to the needs of commerce.

Although the first lighthouse authorized by our fledgling government in 1789 was for the Cape Henry Lighthouse (at the entrance of Chesapeake Bay), it wasn't until 1819 that Congress appropriated funds for a lighthouse in the Bay, at Bodkin Island on the south side of the entrance to Patapsco River leading to the Port of Baltimore. This lighthouse was first lighted in 1822. But getting that first lighthouse constructed was no easy matter. The owner of the land on which it was to be constructed wanted an astronomically high price. The new 5th Auditor of the Treasury, Stephen Pleasonton, who in 1820 assumed the head of our aids to navigation system, wrote to the Collector of Customs at Baltimore. He told him that if a more

reasonable price could not be obtained, then he was to cease negotiations stating, “. . . [it was] an object [lighthouse] calculated not so much to benefit the trade of the United States as that of Maryland, particularly Baltimore.” This was a rather strange statement as the government was the only entity establishing aids to navigation and they were to assist the mariner where needed.

In any event, the light station at Bodkin Point was established and lighted in 1822. Other lighthouses around the Bay soon followed. In 1824, Congress appropriated funds for lighthouses at Pools (also spelled Pooles) Island, upper Chesapeake Bay, and Thomas Point, south of Annapolis at the entrance to the South River.

William Barney, a naval officer in charge of the district, in a letter to Pleasonton stated,

"Many ship owners and seafaring men of respectability have frequently spoken to me on the subject of a light to be placed at the end of Thomas' point bar, a few miles below Annapolis; which extends a considerable distance out into the Bay, cutting the direct path of vessels bound up or down; at the end of which, from four feet, you instantly deepen from six to seven fathoms [a fathom is six feet] water, a light placed here, would be as of great a utility as any one in the Chesapeak [sic] Bay."

Congress appropriate \$5,000 for the Pools Island Lighthouse and \$6,500 for the lighthouse at Thomas Point.

The first order of business was to purchase land for the station. The structure was to be built on land at the end of Thomas Point, and not out on the shoal. The technology that would facilitate constructing a lighthouse out in the water (screw-pile and caisson) was years away. Barney was able to pick up the necessary land for a mere \$75 an acre. He had more difficulty with Pools Island though.

Bids were advertised to construct a round tower of brick or stone, 30 feet high, 18 feet in diameter at the base and 9 feet at the top. The tower tapered in thickness from 3 feet at the base to 20 inches at the top. The contract further specified a dwelling, also of stone or hard brick, 24 by 20 feet, with two rooms, a chimney and fireplace for each room, an attached kitchen measuring 14 by 12 feet. The kitchen

to be equipped with a fireplace, chimney and an oven with an iron door. A brick lined well, "... producing good water ... equipped with a pump or windless with an iron bucket ..." was also part of the contract.

Barney was pleased that several proposals were received from what he considered reliable businessmen. The low bid of \$5,626 was submitted by John Donahoo, who later constructed several Chesapeake Bay lighthouses. Donahoo correctly assumed that the funds appropriated by Congress were to pay for the entire project: land, structures, 2½ percent for the local Collector of Customs, the aids to navigation equipment and the material necessary for the lighthouse. His bid was close, but slightly over the appropriated amount.

By February 23, 1825, Barney and Donahoo reached a compromise and the contract was signed. Work went on steadily and Donahoo proved to build solid, lasting lighthouses. He constructed at least thirteen around the Bay, many which still exist: Pools Island, Concord Point, Point Lookout, Cove Point and Piney Point.

In October, Barney went to Thomas Point to inspect the work in progress. He was generally pleased, but disturbed by the smell of the well water. They argued over the well water and a third party was called in as a mediator. Near the end of December the three visited the site. The referee agreed that the water was not the freshest he had witnessed, but it was clear – and apparently not harmful to health. The

referee stated that he was very impressed with the workmanship of the project.

Barney accepted the finished light station and advertised for keepers. Apparently this was considered a plum position as he received numerous applications.

The Thomas Point Lighthouse served mariners navigating up and down the Bay as well as into Annapolis, especially after five buoys were placed in the river in 1831. But as deeper draft vessels (eight feet or more) began plying the waters, it was necessary that they maintain position in the narrow shipping channel and Thomas Point lighthouse was too distant from the shipping lane to be effective. The 1838 Blunt's Coast Pilot describes how a mariner should navigate the area off Thomas Point,

"In running N. and N.W. from Poplar Island (off which is a light vessel showing one light, which you should leave on your [port] hand) for Annapolis Roads, you pass Thomas Point Lighthouse; and in a southeasterly direction, lies a shoal, which should be avoided, as it is bold to, making it more dangerous. The dwelling house of the keeper stands between two large walnut trees, near the lighthouse ..."

One hopes that the keeper didn't chop down those trees!

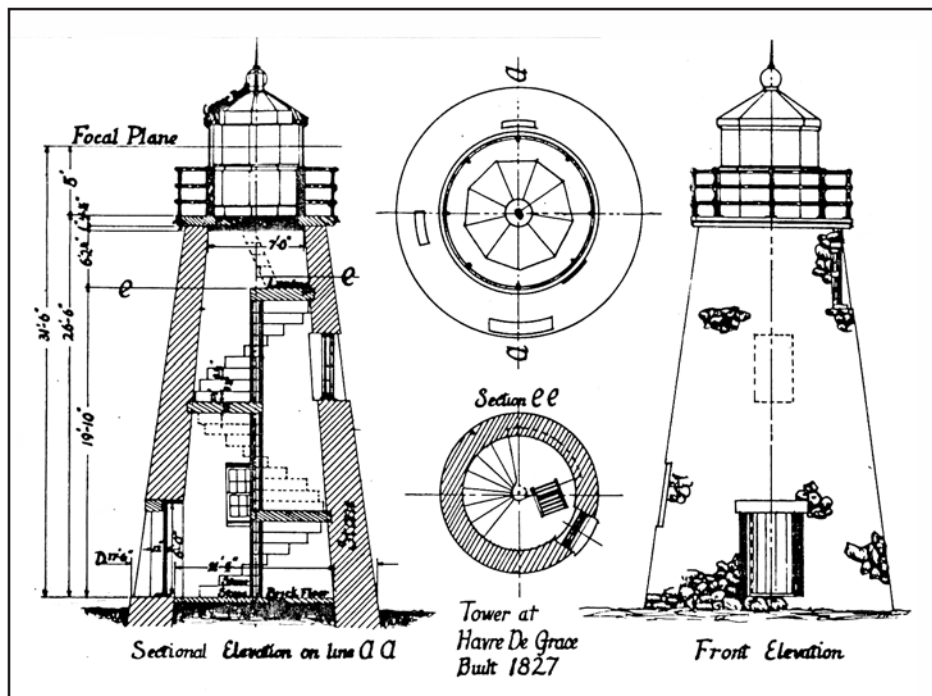
Eventually the Thomas Point Light Station was affected by erosion. Stephen Pleasonton wrote to Congress,

"The light was placed upon a clay bank at least 30 feet high, and about 500 feet from the water. Such was the action of the water upon the bank that in a few years it was washed away to within 50 feet of the light; upon being informed of which, I directed a quantity of rubble stone to be placed at the base of the bank. This arrested the water but in a slight degree and in 1838 it had approached to within 15 feet of the lighthouse when I contracted with Winslow Lewis to take down the tower and rebuild it in a secure place for \$2,000."

The new tower was finished in 1840.

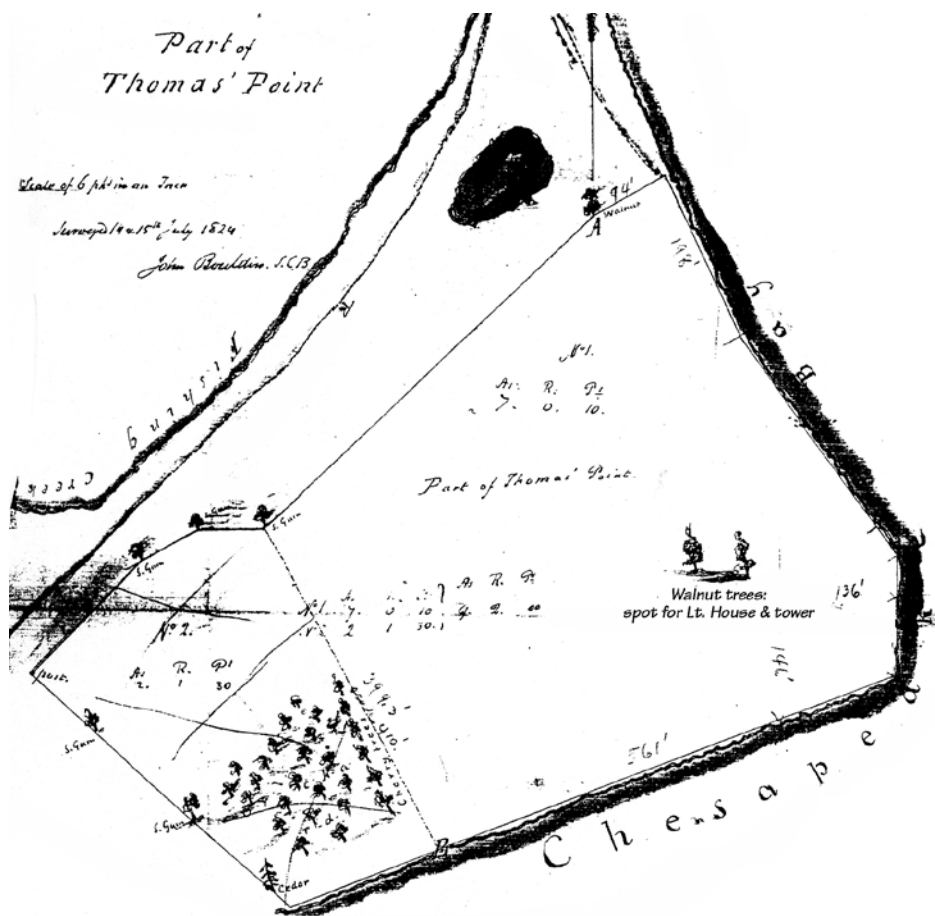
Mariners continued to complain about the Thomas Point Lighthouse. It was situated 1¼ miles back from the end of the shoal it was meant to mark. Even though the shoal was (also) marked by a buoy, mariners didn't always see the buoy or the light until it was too late to avoid going aground. This was especially true during reduced visibility.

In 1872, the Lighthouse Board reported, *"It will be observed by reference to the Coast Survey chart of the Chesapeake Bay*



that the lighthouse at Thomas Point...can serve but poorly its purpose as a warning of the dangerous shoal that makes out from it at a distance of one and one-quarter mile into the bay. This lighthouse was built in 1825, before the introduction of the system of lighthouses in the water on iron piles. Its present location is such that little use can be made of it at night, and in times of foggy or thick weather it is utterly useless. Under no circumstance can vessels drawing more than eight feet water pass within one and a quarter miles of it, as the shoal is continuous, and has on it only that depth and at the outer extremity, and less between this point and the shore. The outer extremity of the shoal is only marked by a buoy, and it is a matter of frequent occurrence to see vessels ashore here. The ineligibility of its present location is frequently a source of complaint by mariners. This is particularly the case when coming up the bay, as the course is changed twice after passing Sharps Island, and approaching Thomas Point.

A light-house on the point of the shoal, in eight feet of water, which will be distant from the shore about one and a quarter miles, is recommended for this place. The new light-house should be provided with a fog-bell, the want of which is another defect at the old station, as the distance from the track of the vessels going up or down the bay is so great that it would be useless if it were put there, as it could not be heard. This station is also in a bad state of repair.



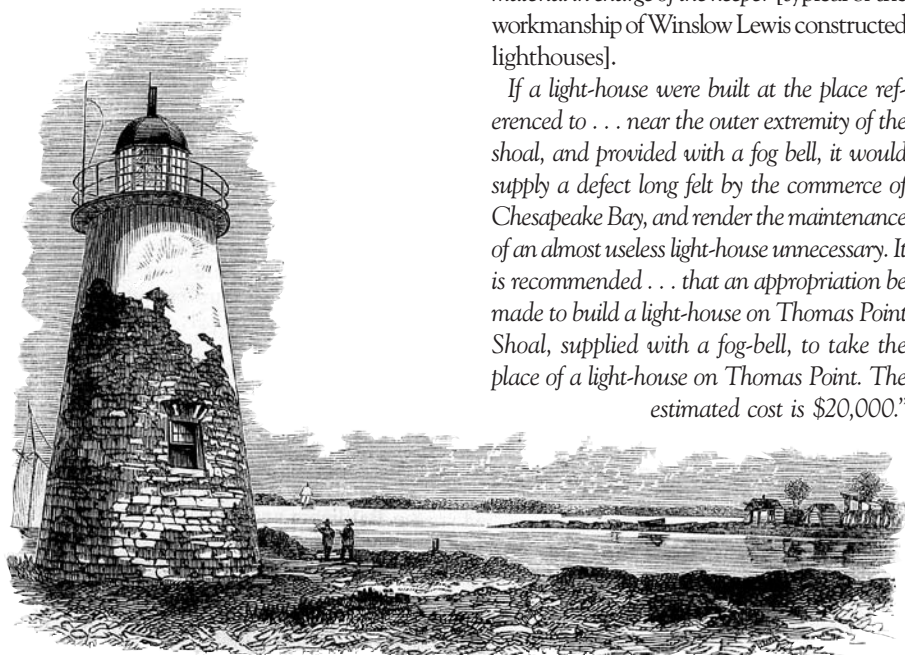
Early plat of Thomas Point showing the two walnut trees and lighthouse at right.

The rain, in windy weather, beats through the old masonry of the tower, flooding the inside of the structure, and frequently damages the material in charge of the keeper [typical of the workmanship of Winslow Lewis constructed lighthouses].

If a light-house were built at the place referenced to . . . near the outer extremity of the shoal, and provided with a fog bell, it would supply a defect long felt by the commerce of Chesapeake Bay, and render the maintenance of an almost useless light-house unnecessary. It is recommended . . . that an appropriation be made to build a light-house on Thomas Point Shoal, supplied with a fog-bell, to take the place of a light-house on Thomas Point. The estimated cost is \$20,000."

This amounts to about \$300,000 in today's money.

In 1873, the Board reported, "An appropriation of \$20,000 was made during the last session of Congress for a screw-pile light-house to be built on the shoal that makes off from Thomas Point . . . The location on the extreme point of the shoal is one of great exposure. In view of this fact, and with the experience of Love Point light-house during the winter of 1872-73 before us, it was deemed expedient to change the plan of this light-house, that instead of building it on screw-pile as was first intended, to build it on a more solid structure, that could be depended upon at all times to safely withstand the heavy ice-floes that form above it in the bay. [The screw-pile Love Point Lighthouse suffered damage due to heavy ice floes; two of the ice-breaker piles in front of the structure were carried away and two of the main screw-pile columns broken. The damage was such that the light was dis-



Left – The original Thomas Point light tower closely resembled this one at Concord Point, MD. Drawing from Harper's New Monthly magazine.

continued. The Lighthouse Service obtained an appropriation of \$10,000 to make repairs and surround the structure with stone rip-rap. But even after the repairs and changes were made the Board complained that the rip-rap wasn't as high as it should be and, please send \$5,000 more.] A cast-iron tube filled with concrete was therefore decided upon, similar to the one now being built for the front light of the Craighill Channel range . . . ”

The Board went on to describe the caisson type lighthouse to be constructed on the shoal ending their report by stating that the new structure, would necessarily be more costly – 125 percent more costly and requested an additional appropriation of \$25,000. Now we're talking real money.

In the next session, Congress called upon all Executive Departments to revise estimates for all proposed projects. The Lighthouse Board suspended the Thomas Point Shoal project and later submitted a revised estimate for an additional appropriation in the amount of \$15,000.

On March 3, 1875, Congress did authorize the additional \$15,000 requested. But the plan was now for a screw-pile lighthouse. The board reported,

“ . . . the plans were prepared, and proposals for finishing the iron work were invited by public advertisement. This work is now progressing well, and it is expected that the structure will be finished during the present season It is to be an iron-pile light-house,

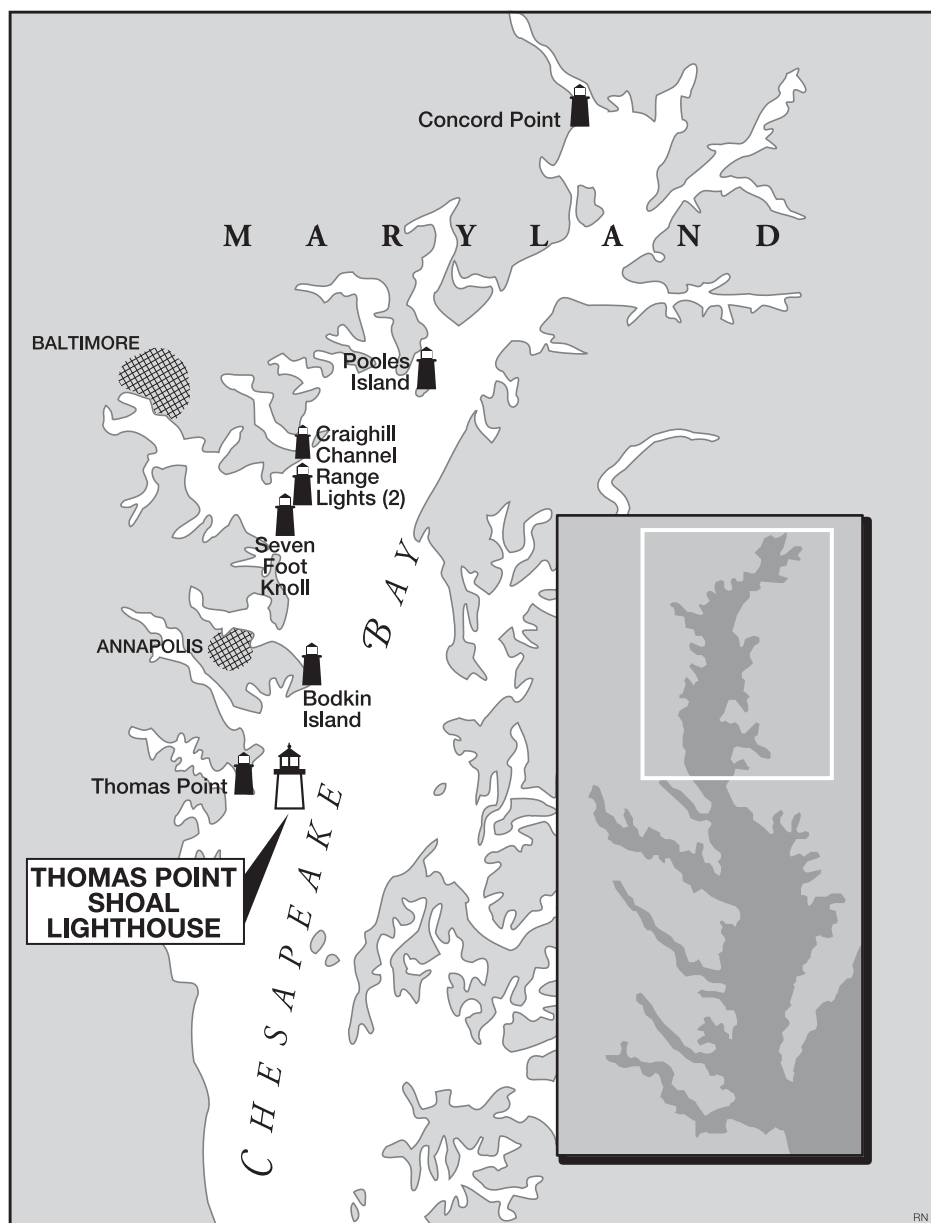
the foundation piles of which are to be of wrought iron, two inches in diameter. The superstructure will be of wood, and serve as the keeper's dwelling. It will be surmounted by a lantern of the 4th order. When this lighthouse is finished, the light on Thomas Point will be discontinued.”

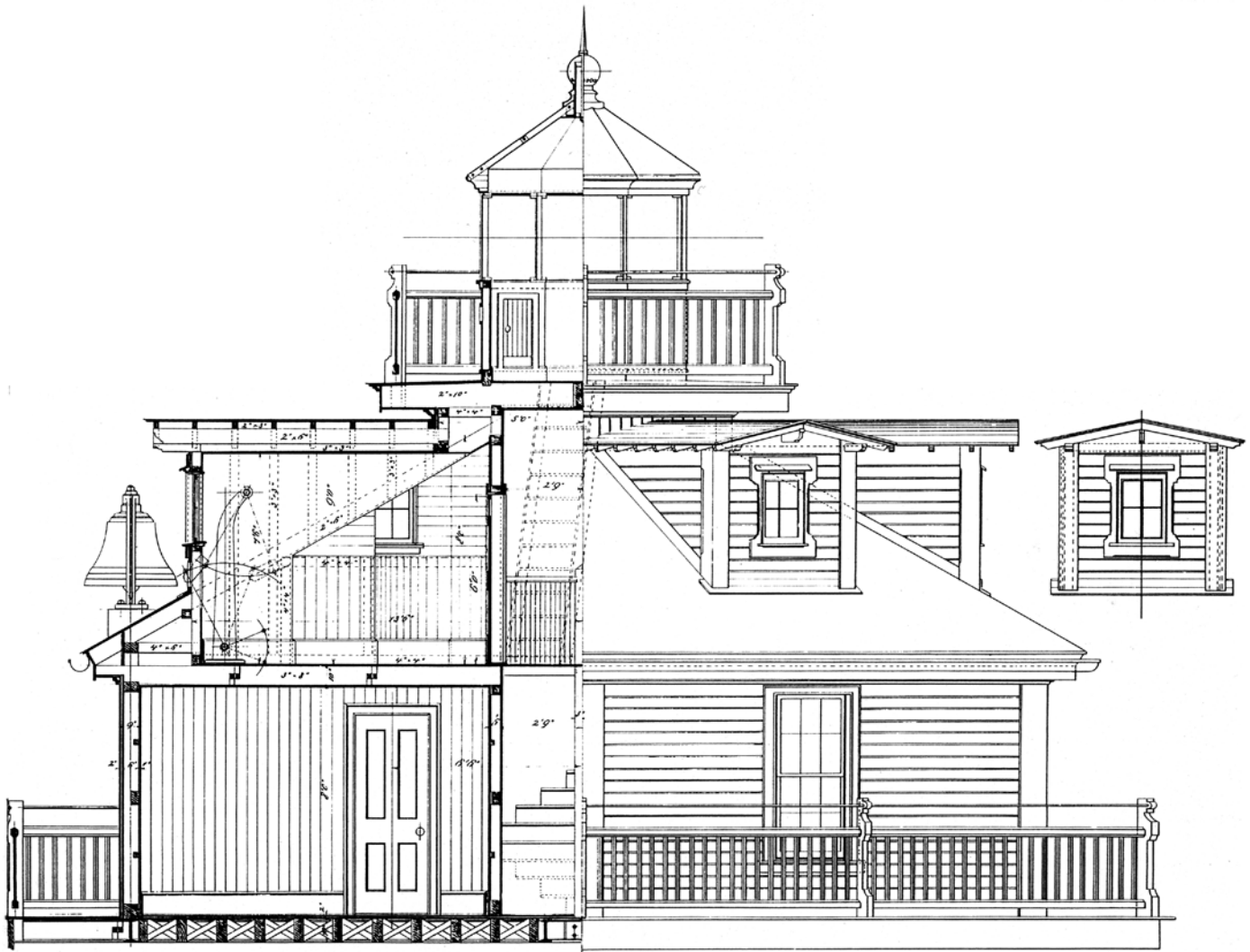
The lighthouse was first lighted on November 28, 1875. A 3-½ order Fresnel lens showed a flashing red light every 20 seconds. This characteristic flies in the face of the color standard of red characteristics being on the right side of a channel when heading into a port, up river or bay that the Lighthouse Board established shortly after it took over in 1852. The automatic fog bell was struck three times every 30 seconds. As the machinery and bell were located on the same level as the bedrooms, that must have produced some sleepless nights.

The dwelling is described as a compact hexagonal structure, 35 feet in diameter, resting on seven cast-iron screw-piles. The dwelling or cottage is adorned with crafted details such as the 'gingerbread' railing which surrounds the main exterior deck and the walkway around the lantern. The dwelling supports six dormer windows. The flooring is diagonally laid of random width Georgia pine. A central, wooden, spiral stairway winds around a central wooden column. The first floor of the dwelling was divided into four equally-sized compartments; two bedrooms, kitchen and a sitting room. There were several small storage compartments; for coal, a pantry, provisions, and a winter water closet. During clement weather keepers used the privy located on the walkway of the main deck, which featured a direct drop into the bay. The second floor contained another bedroom, store room for oil and supplies and a compartment for the automatic fog bell striking machinery, a 1,000-pound bell was hung outside and struck by a hammer from within. Under the main floor was a platform situated in the cross bracing of the iron pile foundation. This platform was used for storage of wood, supplies and on some occasions the home to animals (chickens, goats, pigs, etc).

The Board's prediction that an ice-floe might do to a screw-pile structure at Thomas Point what it did to the Love Point Lighthouse in the winter of 1872-73 occurred that first winter. They reported,

“The iron foundation of this lighthouse was somewhat damaged by heavy masses of running ice, during the past winter. The piles





The nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places describes Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, in part, as:

A wooden hexagonal-shaped cottage, 18-feet on a side, 35-feet in diameter, is built upon the upper set of iron beams that run between the perimeters of the raked columns [steel piles]. On top of each perimeter column, a radial beam which is seated on the central column extends 5 feet outboard creating a cantilever around the entire foundation.

The original privy, located on the south side of the gallery deck [porch], is made of board and bullnosed battens and is cantilevered over the side for a direct drop into the water . . . The roof of the privy continues to and is attached to the side of the cottage, providing a protected area over the outhouse entrance. On the north side of the gallery deck is a 48-inch wide by 144-inch-long storage building cantilevered over the side. Double doors provide access to this storage area from the gallery.

The cottage is sheathed with wooden, horizontal, German-molded lap siding. There are two sets of davits for launching

small craft [on opposite sides of the structure to ensure there will always be a lee].

The first level of the cottage is partitioned into a mechanical room, bedroom, dayroom and kitchen. In the mechanical room the original beaded tongue-and-groove wall and ceiling paneling as well as original flooring is intact. The floor is diagonally laid, random-width Georgia pine. A 525-gallon cypress water tank is located in this room. A 200-gallon wooden water tank is located in one of the two closets in this room. The spigot for this tank would have extended through the closet wall into the kitchen, below which the copper drip funnel is still in place. The bedroom walls have been covered with painted plywood paneling . . . the floor is covered with carpeting. The interior doors and window casings and sash appear to be original. The day room contains the aids to navigation control and monitoring system equipment. In the pantry area the original beaded tongue-and-groove wall paneling is extant. The windows on first level are a six over six configuration.

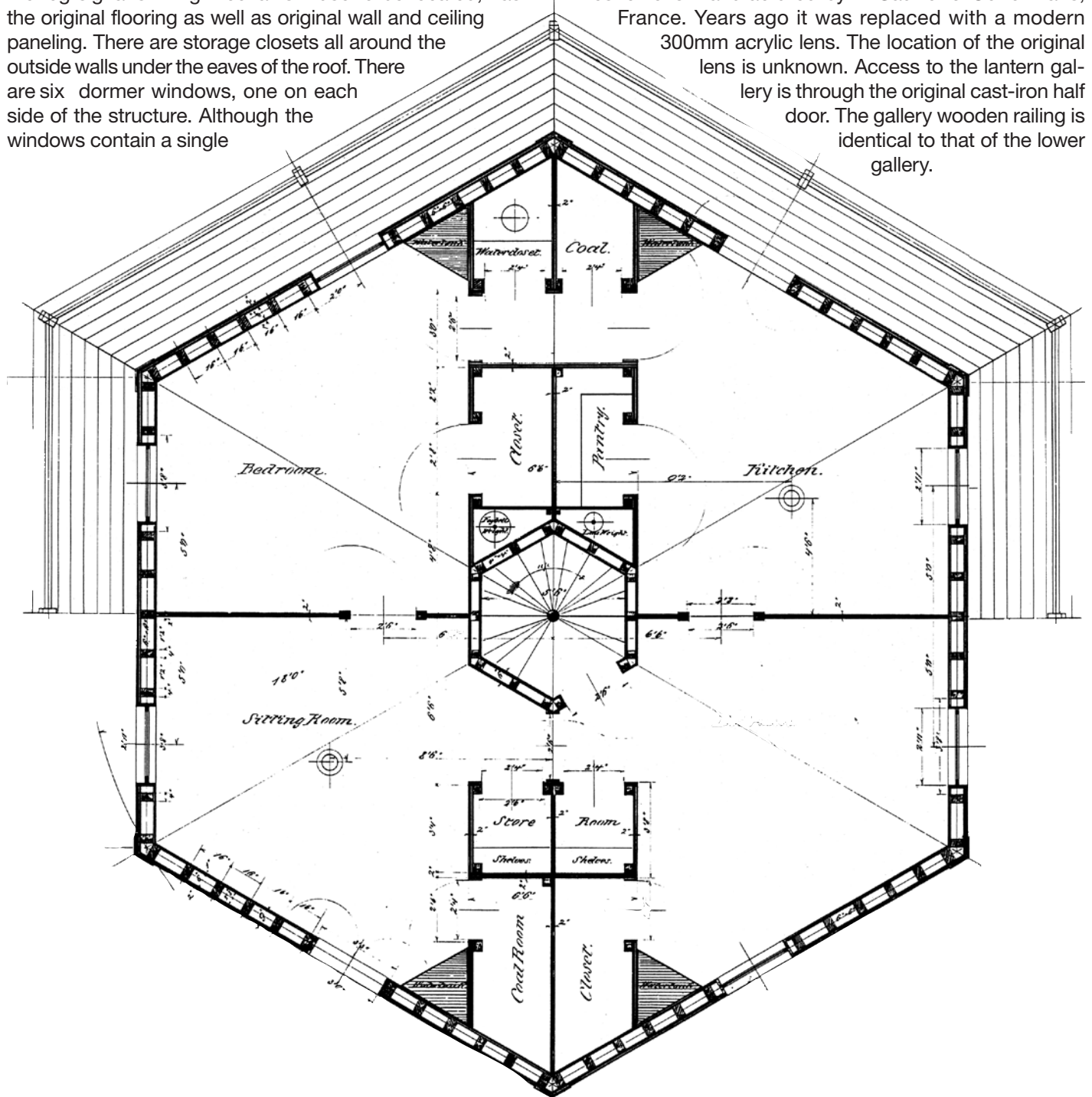
The second level of the cottage is accessed by a spiral wooden staircase winding around a central wooden column.

The stairwell is hexagonal-shaped and sided with vertical tongue-and-groove beaded variable-width wall paneling. The stair treads and risers appear to be original. At the top of the stairs to the second-level is a graceful curved wooden railing cap. Just inside the entrance to the bedroom from the stairs is a hatch which allows material to be raised to that level without having to use the narrow staircase. The bedroom appears to have all the original wall and ceiling paneling and the original flooring. The second room, where the fog signal striking mechanism use to be located, has the original flooring as well as original wall and ceiling paneling. There are storage closets all around the outside walls under the eaves of the roof. There are six dormer windows, one on each side of the structure. Although the windows contain a single

pane, historical photos indicate that originally they were four paned windows.

The fourth order octagonal lantern room is accessed by a wooden ship's ladder which is fitted with an iron rail on the left side. The lantern room walls are cast-iron, the interior sheathed with vertical beaded board below the sills. On each parapet wall in a brass air ventilator. There are six glass panes set in cast-iron frames.

Originally, the lantern contained a four panel 4th order Fresnel lens manufactured by L. Sautter & Co. of Paris, France. Years ago it was replaced with a modern 300mm acrylic lens. The location of the original lens is unknown. Access to the lantern gallery is through the original cast-iron half door. The gallery wooden railing is identical to that of the lower gallery.



were pushed out of perpendicular about one inch to the foot, and the lower spur pile was broken from horizontal braces. The oscillatory motion imparted to the superstructure by the impact of the ice overturned the lens [and probably scared the keeper], and damaged it to such an extent as to make its replacement by another necessary. While this change was being made a temporary light was displayed from the old structure on Thomas Point. The superstructure of the light-house was not damaged, and the foundation has since been repaired. To protect against further damage by ice, a detached ice-breaker has been placed at the axis of the current, an about 90 feet to the north of the house . . . some rip-rap will be placed about the piles [of the ice-breaker] as an added protection."

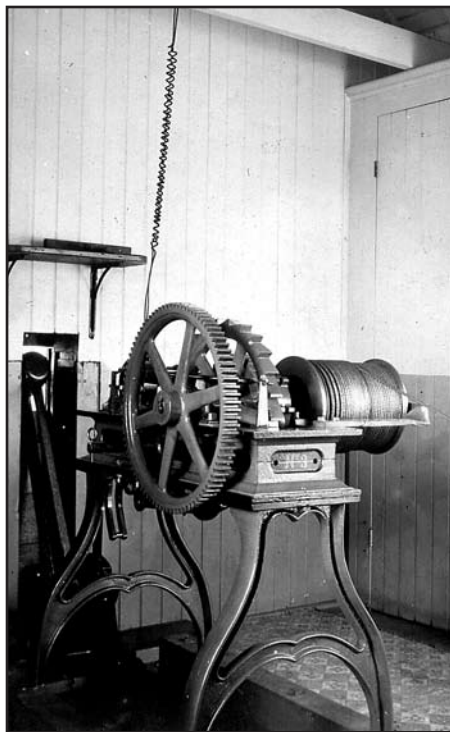
The 3½ order lens was replaced by a 4th order.

The Lewis tower finally fell down in 1894. The original land at Thomas Point eroded from seven to two acres and became an island. It was sold for about \$100 in 1914.

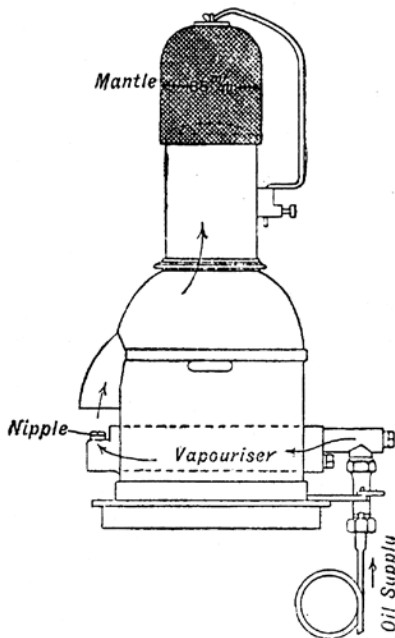
After the ice floe incident, Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse experienced a rather quiet existence. During the 1880s additional rip-rap was added as further protection against ice floes and over the years minor repairs made. But today the last screw-pile lighthouse in Chesapeake Bay to remain in situ is substantially the same as when it first flashed its red light out over the Bay in 1875.

In 1913, an I.O.V. (Incandescent Oil Vapor) lamp replaced the kerosene wick lamp. More rip-rap was added over the years. A generator was added in 1933, and the next year the optic was electrified. A diaphone fog horn replaced the 1,000 bell signal in 1938. A motor boat was authorized in this era and in 1951 a radio beacon was installed.

Over the years ice floes damaged or destroyed several screw-pile light-houses. The only one built in the Great Lakes at Maumee Bay, Lake Erie (1855), didn't last its first winter. Chesapeake Bay's Janes Island (1867) was destroyed by ice in 1879, and Love Point was destroyed in 1872, The dwelling of the Sharps Island Lighthouse was torn from its foundation in 1881 with the keepers inside and carried down bay for 16 hours until it grounded. The Wolf Trap Lighthouse (1870) suffered a similar fate in January 1893 when it was destroyed by ice and discovered the next day, twenty miles away with only the lan-



An automatic bell striker, similar to this one, was installed on the second floor of the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse. The sledge hammer, at left, was propelled through a hole in the wall to strike the 1,000 lb bell. The original characteristic was three blows every 30 seconds. Imagine trying to sleep in the next room. See poem inside rear cover. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.



Incandescent Oil Vapor Lamp.

tern room showing above the ice. These incidents caused the Lighthouse Board to take steps. They installed ice breakers up Bay of the lighthouses and surrounded the breakers and the screw-pile with rip-rap. These quaint lighthouses were always in danger of being destroyed by ice, fire or even collision with a vessel. In two cases the keepers deserted their lighthouses when an ice floe started to strike the structures. This prompted the inspector for the 5th District to issue the following admonition in 1879:

"As there appears to be a miss apprehension on the part of some Light Keepers as to duty under circumstances when the station is endangered by ice or other causes, they are reminded that this position of Light Keeper is one of danger, as well as trust, that they must remain by their light as long as the house stands; and if they are dismissed to do so, it is better to resign now, rather than be dismissed for desertion, when danger arises, as the Keepers of Janes Island & Love Point Lt. Houses have been."

The beginning of the end for the quaint screw-pile design began in 1894. The Lighthouse Board noted in their annual report, "In view of recent damages by ice to screw-pile structures in Chesapeake Bay, the Board is now of the opinion that only caisson structures should be used where such dangers exist." The first caisson was constructed back in 1873 as the Craighill Channel Front Range Light. Caissons, however, were more expensive and took longer to construct than a screw-pile structure.

The first keeper of the new Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse was Eugene Buckenal who was assigned on November 11, 1875 at a rate of pay of \$660 a year. He was assigned an assistant, Charles Miller, on November 16, 1875 making \$400 a year. On August 19, 1879 a 2nd Assistant, by the name of Julius Warmkessel was assigned to the station at the same rate of pay as the 1st assistant. Buckenal resigned on November 27, 1880 and Miller was promoted to keeper the same day. Julius Warmkessel moved up to 1st assistant. On December 7, 1880 John Parrish was transferred to Thomas Point Shoal as the 2nd Assistant. Some sort of fight or fracas must have occurred because six months later, on June 17, 1881, both Miller and Parrish were "removed," the Service's euphemism for fired. Over the next five years seven keepers and assistants were either removed or resigned.

Some of the Chesapeake Bay lighthouses had families living in the dwelling, while at other stations families lived ashore and the keepers rotated duty days. After the Coast Guard assumed control, families always lived ashore. By 1964, Thomas Point Shoal was the only manned lighthouse on Chesapeake Bay. Four Coast Guardsmen were assigned – three on duty for a period of 21 days, with one on shore for seven days. Once a month a tender delivered water, fuel and other provisions.

In 1970, the routine was changed to a crew of three men, two weeks on and one week off. The relief keeper arrived with food and mail and the man going ashore took the garbage with him.

Of men interviewed about life at the station, some didn't care for the assignment, others loved it. Of course during the last years when it was manned the crew had television to amuse them. Duties such as maintaining the station, taking weather readings, maintaining the log and tending to the calibration equipment kept them busy.

In 1972, the Coast Guard announced that the station was being evaluated as to its cost effectiveness. The likely outcome meant that the cottage portion would be destroyed and a small steel tower erected on the pile foundation, such as had occurred at several other screw-pile lighthouses around the bay and tributaries to the bay. When this news was announced in

local papers the public outcry was instant and loud. The Coast Guard backed down and on January 23, 1975, the lighthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It has since been elevated to National Historic Landmark status, one of only ten lighthouses in the country to be so designated. Of the 41 screw-pile lighthouses constructed around Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, only three remain. Two, Hooper Strait and Drum Point, have been relocated to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum at St. Michaels, MD and the Calvert Marine Museum, Solomons, MD respectively. Only Thomas Point Shoal still stands watch on her original station off Annapolis.



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse in recent years when manned. Rock piles on the up-bay and down-bay sides are to divert ice floes. Above the storage shed, at right on the main deck is the electronic, pure-tone sound (fog) signal. Photo by Joan Mullaney.

SNAP-SHOTS OF THOMAS POINT SHOAL

By Henry Gonzalez



The 1950s kitchen of the lighthouse will be removed.



Right top – Detail of the original wall covering of the second story.



Right – The octagon stairwell leading from the main deck to the second story.



The original 525-gallon cypress water tank is in surprisingly good condition.



This beautiful railing circles both the main gallery and the lantern room gallery.



Above left – The original privy, with direct drop into the bay can be seen at left. At right is one of the davits to hoist the station boat up to deck level.
Above right – The interior of the privy indicating that the pigeon had a difficult time hitting the hole.

Below – The screw-pile system at Thomas Point Shoal showing the landing platform. In earlier times the keepers used this storage platform for supplies and often for animals (chickens, pigs, etc.).

