Lantern on Lewes

Where the Past is Present

Stories of Historic Lewes, Delaware

Told in a Lively Manner
by
Hazel D. Brittingham

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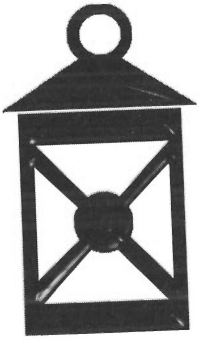


Design and Layout
Elaine Ippolito

People who are inclined to refrain from a current visit because they saw The Monument many years ago are probably unaware that something new has been added. When Lewes was 350 years old in 1981, St. Peter's Episcopal Church of Lewes observed its 300th anniversary as an Episcopal parish and erected a ten-foot granite cross in the center of the cemetery. The Latin Cross with the Circle of Eternity memorializes both anniversaries and is inscribed with appropriate wording at its base.

Erected 1981 on the 300th anniversary of the grant of land to the Anglican congregation at Lewes and in memory of the first settlers who died here in 1631

And there is more! It was at the time of the installation of the cross that the about-to-retire rector, the Rev. Frank L. Moon, was able to say "Amen" to a project dear to his heart. He was insistent that the lines of the stockade surrounding the early settlement, and within the cemetery, be permanently marked. Several marble markers delineate the lines of the palisade as determined by the Sussex Society and installed with the assistance of the late Dr. James E. Marvil of the Lewes Historical Society.

The Monument was dedicated on September 22, 1909, and much credit must be paid to the late Dr. C. H. B. Turner, then rector of St. Peter's Church, for the event which was accompanied by big doin's in the little town. The original settlement site, denoted as the "DeVries Palisade," was placed on the National Register of Historic Places under the date of February 23, 1972, and the Cross was dedicated on June 28, 1981.

The Cape Henlopen Lighthouse

On Easter Monday of 1926, when Lewes and Rehoboth residents made their annual trek to the Great Dune on the oceanfront, they found the abandoned Cape Henlopen Lighthouse officially off-limits. As tradition dictated, young and old rolled their colorful Easter eggs, and themselves too, down the sand hill. Any hope of visiting the 161-year-old lighthouse on that day was dashed, however, as Coast Guardsmen were on duty to prohibit sightseers from getting too close, for safety's sake.

Photograph of Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, about 1900, showing sand surrounding the keeper's house.

One week and one day later, on Tuesday, April 13, Destiny and Doom collided shortly before 1 p.m., when the second oldest lighthouse structure in the U.S. surrendered to the loss of sand and abundance of tide. Cape Henlopen Lighthouse had stood valiantly since about 1765 when British shipping interests initiated the construction of a sorely needed navigational aid on Cape Henlopen.

The tower, octagonal in design and standing seven stories high, was constructed of granite brought from northern Delaware. The illuminating apparatus was atop the tower which itself stood atop a lofty sand dune. The landmark had been planted about a quarter of a mile from the water's edge in the midst of a pine and cedar forest. (Inaccuracies abound regarding the lighthouse's shape, height, and distance from the water, and appear even in material considered reliable.)

One penman, recording the construction of the structure, wrote that, "It bids fair to endure until the final wreck of all things shall destroy it." How chagrined he would have been if, at 1 o'clock on April 13, 1926, he were able to witness the demolition as a result of the toll of time, tide, and vagaries of the sand.

Here are some accounts of those who "saw 'er go" on that bright, sunshiny spring day with strong NE breezes accompanied by a thermometer reading of 62 degrees. Some spectators saw the doom of the tower from the sea, and some from land. The crew of the pilot boat *Philadelphia* had a front-row seat, and personnel at the Radio Station on Cape Henlopen had a land-based ringside seat.

Irony headlines the gathering that day of a group of government officials planning to inspect the foundation of the lighthouse. The officers were aboard a ship enjoying lunch while one remained on deck with binoculars. After rushing below shouting out, "It's gone!" the eyewitness told

that the lighthouse seemed to be leaning more than usual and it suddenly crumpled into three sections and fell onto the beach. Upon "inspecting" the pile of rubble that afternoon, the men were no doubt amazed that the keeper's house had not accompanied her spouse in the fall, but tottered precariously on the sandy ridge. Capt. John Wingate, in command of the adjacent Cape Henlopen Coast Guard Station at the time, reported that it appeared to him that the foundation had just stood all it could and it "slipped down the slope." Noting that he and his lookout man rushed to the scene of destruction, Capt. Wingate then uttered the truth of the ages: "There wasn't anything we could do about it."

Attempts to do something about the perilous condition of sand erosion over the years included the placement of gravel and loads of pine tops, planting of underwood and weeds, and construction of rip-rap, jetties, groins, sea walls, and bulkheads. Even the appointment by Delaware's governor in 1925 of the Henlopen Lighthouse Preservation Commission failed to intimidate Mother Nature as she made her advances.

Mr. Rowland Brewer of Lewes's Western Union office had enjoyed his lunch hour and was leaning on the bridge as he looked toward the cape. He blinked, opened his eyes and couldn't believe them: the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse was gone! He hurried to Art Morris's drug store and spread the word. The druggist checked the clock; it was nearly one.

On Pilottown Road a housewife, alerted to the possibility that the days of the lighthouse were numbered, was combining her interest in its welfare with the progress

After the Fall

of the pot boiling away on her stove. She made a regular run from window to pot. From window to pot and back to window—and the slate of her horizon had been wiped clean. Never before in her life had she glanced in that direction and not viewed that friendly tower.

Understandably, the beloved Cape Henlopen Lighthouse had assumed a personality of its own in the minds and hearts of area folk. Even after "dying" in 1926, she remains a landmark of memory. May she rest in peace.

The Delaware Bay Breakwaters

For almost a century, mariners inward-bound from Atlantic voyages have been greeted by a pair of lighthouses at the entrance to Delaware Bay. Just off Lewes and within the curve of Cape Henlopen, the East End Light beamed illumination to men of the sea from 1885; while in water of greater depth the Harbor of Refuge Light served the same purpose from 1901. (Both lighthouses were decommissioned in 1996.) Each tower rests on the eastern end of a massive granite breakwater. They may be seen at a relatively close range from land at the birdnesting area at Cape Henlopen State Park.

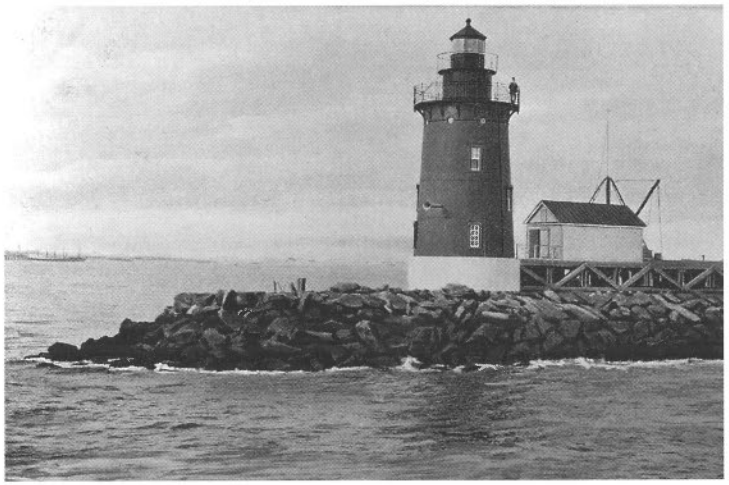
The haven formed by the two breakwaters is often spoken of locally as the Harbor of Refuge. Technically, the inner breakwater (also called the first or old breakwater) is the Delaware Breakwater; its construction got underway in 1828. It was initially composed of two sections—the breakwater and an ice breaker pier—separated by a gap measuring 1350 feet. The breakwater is anchored by the East End Light, the rust-colored conical structure on a circular concrete base.

The interval between the first breakwater and the ice breaker was closed by work performed during the last two decades of the 1800s. Simultaneously, construction was commenced on a new and enlarged harbor—the outer breakwater also called the second or new breakwater—but officially listed as the National Harbor of Refuge. Completed by 1901, its terminus has been home to the Harbor of Refuge Light, the current structure being the white cylindrical tower rising above a substantial black base.

The following is an account of the construction of the two breakwaters that present a formidable feature in Lewes's coastal portrait and figure prominently in its maritime history.

The Inner Breakwater

In addition to encountering the shoal-laden Delaware Bay, ships heading upriver, many to the port of Philadelphia, were ever at the mercy of storms and in special peril at the trysting place of ocean and bay. The need for a sanctuary for sailing vessels caught in storms, or otherwise temporarily detained, prompted merchants and mariners to look to the federal government for assistance in the construction of such a shelter. After untold numbers of attempts and urgings, promoters found an ally in America's sixth president, John Quincy Adams, who favored large internal improvement projects and supported the idea of an artificial harbor off Lewes. Congress first appropriated funds in 1828, and contracts were let for stone from the Palisades in New York's Hudson River. (Eventually, all stone for the breakwaters and ice breakers came from the Brandywine area in upper Delaware.)



Early view of East End Lighthouse

An architect and engineer, William Strickland of Philadelphia, was appointed chief engineer to superintend

1890 view of Strickland Lighthouse (left) and Signal Station of Philadelphia Maritime Exchange

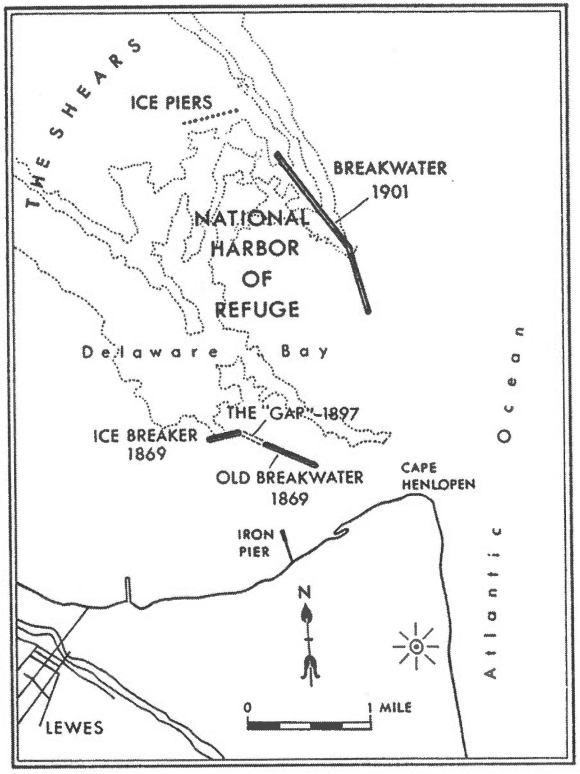
the construction of two detached barriers—a breakwater and ice breaker pier of his own design. At first, stones of about 1/4 ton were used but soon were found to be too small to furnish an adequate base. When boulders ranging from 2 1/2 to 6 tons were found suitable, improved machinery for handling them was required. Strickland is credited with designing the man-powered crane put to use in 1831.

Trial and error reigned since there was no precedent on which to rely. The work season, restricted because of weather conditions, generally ranged from April through September. Adverse winds were matched by the uncertainty of Congress's willingness to provide a constant flow of money. Work, which stalled during 1834 because of lack of appropriation, proceeded at a reduced pace when resumed. Shoaling was experienced, and anticipated completion dates were set, passed, and forgotten.

By 1840, approximately 90 percent of the original intent of the project had been met, but the final date of completion was not until 1869 when the design height of 14 feet above low water was attained. Records of the Corps of

Engineers cite the breakwater as 2586 feet at its base which averages 160 feet in width, with a top width of 22 feet, and the ice breaker pier as running a distance of 1400 feet. Additionally, the Corps claims that the project was the second greatest structure of its kind in the world, on a par with the Plymouth, England, breakwater. Building of this precedent-setting structure in America spanned the terms of a dozen presidents and cost over two million dollars.

Another Strickland signature was placed on the project when he designed a stone and concrete lighthouse built at the then-western end of the barrier. Called the



Courtesy of U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, Philadelphia District

Strickland Lighthouse, it was on station from 1838 until 1903, and the structure performed other maritime duties until 1942. It has been removed.

Even prior to completion of the first breakwater, larger ships were beginning to find the protected area too shallow to navigate. However, the haven served well in time of need, and it is known that by 1840 approximately 25 vessels used it daily. Within a few hours of storm threats, over 200 ships crowded into the harbor. One writer of the day described such a time as presenting "a forest of masts moving and swaying to and fro as trees bent into the wind."

A temporary light on the eastern end of the breakwater was replaced in 1885 by the East End Light which took over lighthouse duties earlier performed by the Beacon located on the point of Cape Henlopen. (This Beacon is not to be confused with the older and more lofty Cape Henlopen Lighthouse which fell seaward in 1926, ending a 160-year career of cautioning seamen of the dangerous shoals and the restless sandy cape at the bay entrance.)

Closing the Gap

The 1350-foot space between the inner breakwater and its ice breaker pier was found to cause tidal action that greatly diminished the harbor's effectiveness. After years of discussion, studies, and political pleas, money was appropriated to close the gap. Approved in 1882, work continued until 1898. A steam derrick for handling ever-larger boulders allowed more precision and economy in the process. This construction, and that of the new and larger breakwater to follow, utilized a brush mattress foundation; the mats were woven from pine trees cut at Cape Henlopen.

The Outer Breakwater and Ice Breakers

A new and larger outer breakwater to run for about 1 1/2 miles and to include a series of ice breakers at its upper end for the purpose of breaking up ice floes, was authorized by Congress in 1896. The construction, placed 6500 feet north of the inner barrier, was completed on December 11, 1901. The steam derricks handling the stone allowed the use of boulders weighing up to 13 tons which were placed in a step arrangement to reduce the intensity of wave action The dressed stone provided a more regular appearance than that of the Delaware Breakwater.

The length of rock measures 7950 feet at water level and extends to a depth of about 50 feet; the top surface is 40 feet wide. The cost was some over two million dollars. Names closely associated with the latter project include those of Col. C. W. Raymond, officer in charge of the Philadelphia District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and a noted marine engineer, J. F. Hasskarl.

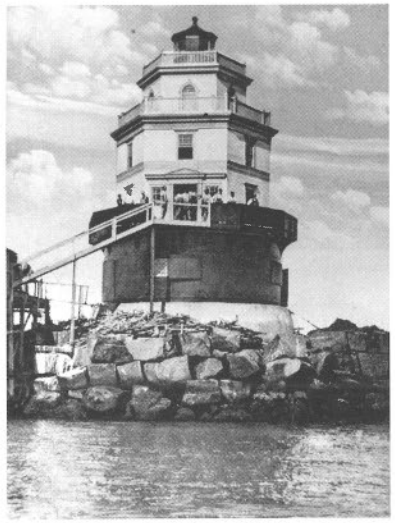
The Harbor of Refuge Light was built as soon as the breakwater base was ready, and it assumed the job of illumination previously furnished by the Strickland Lighthouse. According to varied accounts of the amount of stone required to build the breakwaters and ice breakers, it appears that slightly under 2 1/2 million tons of granite were delivered to the work sites by water transportation during a time span from 1828 until after the arrival of the 20th century.

Neither stretch of the sea-surrounded stone is laid in a straight line; each is angled. Some evidence of the configuration may be seen by travelers using the Cape May-Lewes Ferry. When leaving Lewes, the vessels normally follow a route through the National Harbor of Refuge, emerging between the outer breakwater and its archipelago of ice breakers.

Recently accepted for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places is the complex titled National Harbor of Refuge and Delaware Breakwater Harbor Historic District. This nautical district is a "first" on the Register and includes not only the breakwaters, their lighthouses and the ice breakers, but the former Coast Guard Station now owned and used by the Pilots Association of the Bay and River Delaware.

And what of today and the role played by the breakwaters in modern-day shipping? In this era when tankers range as much as four times the length of those early 200-foot-long sailing schooners and do not require refuge, the haven offered between the granite structures continues to serve. Not only recreational fishing boats, but ships of medium size and small coastal craft in pursuit of their trades find the shelter helpful.

The bulwarks of stone remain changeless during times awash in a sea of change.



View of the first Harbor of Refuge Lighthouse. Damaged by a storm in 1920, it was replaced by a new structure in 1926.