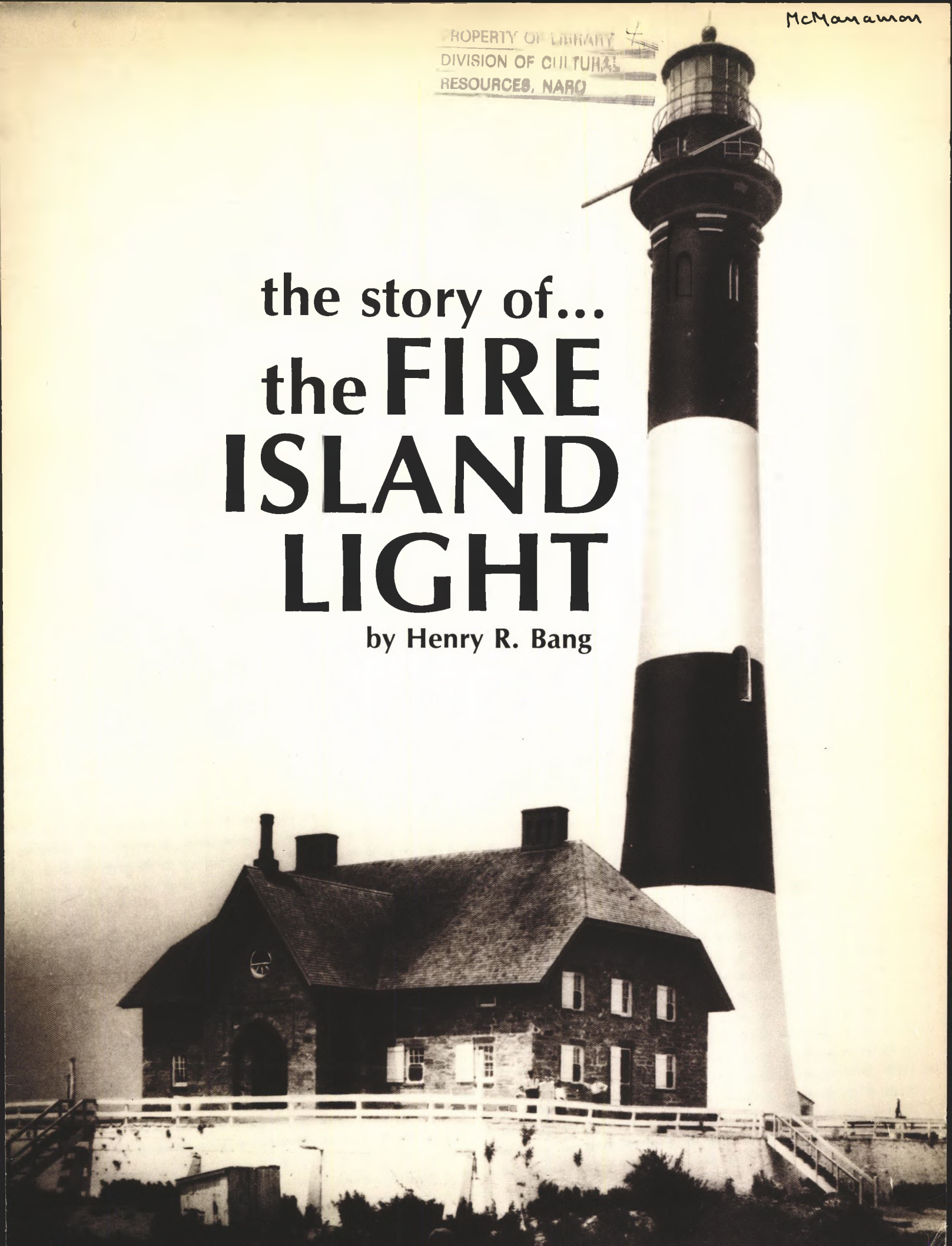
the story of... the FIRE ISLAND LIGHT

by Henry R. Bang



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First Edition - Published March, 1981

About Henry Bang

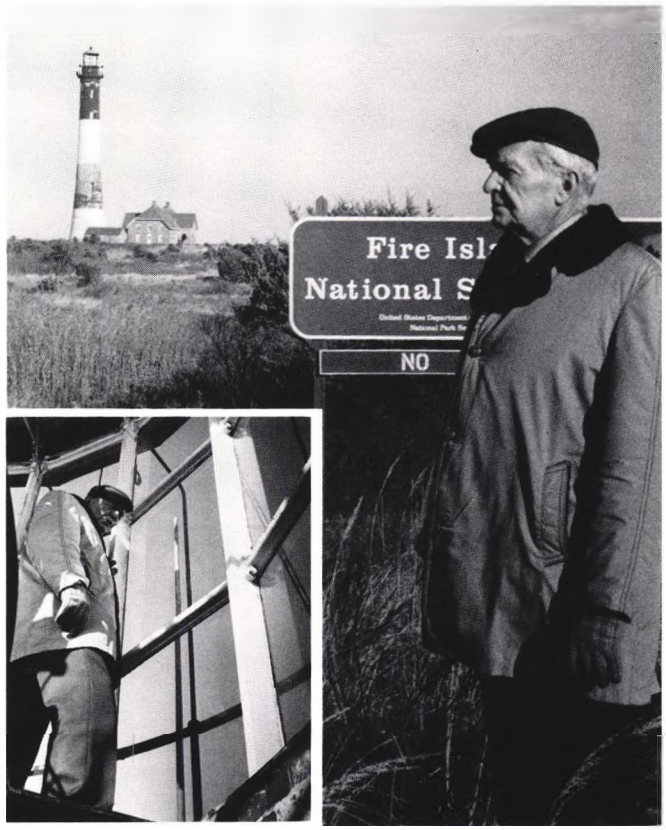
In the broadest sense, Henry R. Bang - the man who has been the driving force behind completing this story - is a renaissance man in modern dress.

A native Long Islander, he grew up in East Rockaway, and has been a forty-year resident of Baldwin, in Nassau County, N.Y. After attending Columbia University, Mr. Bang joined the N.Y. Telephone Co., and in time rose to become the General Manager for the L.I. area. In 1967, he took early retirement from N.Y. Telephone to become Executive Director of the L.I. Health and Hospital Planning Council - a group deeply involved in long-range planning for the growth of health facilities and health care in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. He held that position until HHPC was legislated out of existence.

Henry Bang has always devoted a considerable part of his time to working with voluntary agencies on growing Long Island. He was a founding member of the L.I. Fund, predecessor of the United Way of L.I., and its' former President. Twenty years later, he remains active with the United Way of L.I. He is a past-President of the Red Cross of L.I., and is active with the Salvation Army. He is also a long-time member of the Board of the L.I. YMCA. In the mid-seventies, Mr. Bang was named by Newsday as one of Long Island's 50 Leaders.

Throughout his long and distinguished career of service to others, Henry Bang and his wife, Edna, have had a favorite weekend retreat - a little spit of sand in the Great South Bay called West Fire Island. There, for most of the summers of their long and happy married life, Edna and Henry Bang have gone to their island retreat, and have seen their daughters and grandchildren grow up, spending their summers in this wild, natural retreat - within sight of the Fire Island Light. A student of area history, Henry Bang has written the history of West Island, and undertook to prepare this story of the Fire Island Light.

In the summer of 1980, Edna Bang passed away. The sadness of her passing is brightened by the years of devotion she had shared with her husband, Henry, who now dedicates this work to her memory.



Dedication. . . .

This history of the Fire Island Light is for the many who, like myself, share a sense of the colorful history of our area. There are many of us who look forward to the preservation of the Fire Island Light - so future generations can see and feel the sense of what life was like on Long Island in a less complicated time.

I wish to express my thanks to the many people who contributed to the preparation of this history - the personnel of the National Park Service, including Chief Ranger Bill Schenk and his assistant Neal Bullington, to Ranger 'Rocky' Norris and NPS Historian Steve Kesselman who filled in many of the missing portions of our history. We are indebted to Cyril A. Lewis, who has given us permission to reproduce his wonderful water colors. I especially thank Dick Guido of Glen Cove, who helped in editing the story and producing this book.

In loving memory of the times we spent together in the shadow of the Fire Island Light, I dedicate this story to my late wife, Edna.

Sincerely,

Henry R. Bang

Henry R. Bang

Editors Note: *To keep the flavor of the times, and maintain the accuracy of our tale, we have copied the quoted statements exactly, including occasional misspellings and lack of proper punctuation.*

The Story of the Fire Island Light

THE STORY OF THE FIRE ISLAND LIGHT

To those of our contemporaries who embrace the total comforts of the electronic age, the Fire Island Light is a relic of a past age - like the nickel beer, vaudeville and the open-sided trolley cars.

Those international travelers who sit secure in the staterooms of the great ocean liners or in cabins of the strato jets hurtling through the stratosphere are only dimly aware of the invisible pulses of a far-off radar station reaching out electronic fingers that caress the vessels night and day. They give little thought to the men in the pilot's cabin, or to the officers on the bridge, whose eyes are glued to the impersonal black screen with the cold green light sweeping around in a circle, causing a blip to pinpoint the position of the vessel carrying hundreds - perhaps thousands - of souls to a far-off destination through the night.

But for those who follow the sea - and those thoughtful romantics that think about man and nature - the lighthouse stands even today as a sturdy symbol of man's enduring strength in his struggle against the forces of nature, of his desire to help his fellow man make his way through the unfriendly darkness of the night.

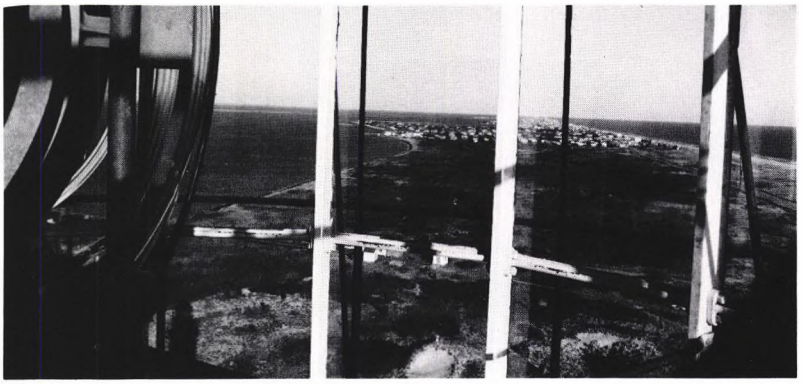
We suspect that even the veteran sea-going captain, with all his sophisticated radar and radio beams to guide him, must still feel a warming sense of relief, when he *'makes'* the Fire Island light. To those thousands of pleasure boat sailors who have braved the open sea on their way back from Cutty Hunk and Nantucket, or are returning from an ocean adventure to Bermuda or the Caribbean - making a lighthouse on the return breaks the silent dam of tension. The far-off pinpoint of light that revolved in the darkness once beamed warmth and welcome. The sight of the lighthouse announces the proximity of home and hearth - it brings a physical comfort that cannot be matched by the cold, electronic blips of the radar screen.

There in the distance, the bright flashing light bespoke a human presence in the night. The lighthouse keeper was on the job, a man and his family nearby, a human being reaching out through the night across the sea to guide you home.

A friendly landmark during the day for the thousands of craft that ply the Great South Bay, and the even hardier souls who venture out into the ocean, the Fire Island Light brought the presence of mankind to souls at sea and those seeking their way through the darkness.

The Fire Island Light went dark in 1974, after 148 years of service to those navigating in Long Island waters. Modern technology had made it obsolete. Yet, the gaunt and lonely anachronism still stands as a landmark today - familiar and comforting to boatmen. . .and of special significance to those with a sense of history.

The Fire Island Light today.



View from the Fire Island Light looking East.

Circular stairway.

CHAPTER I

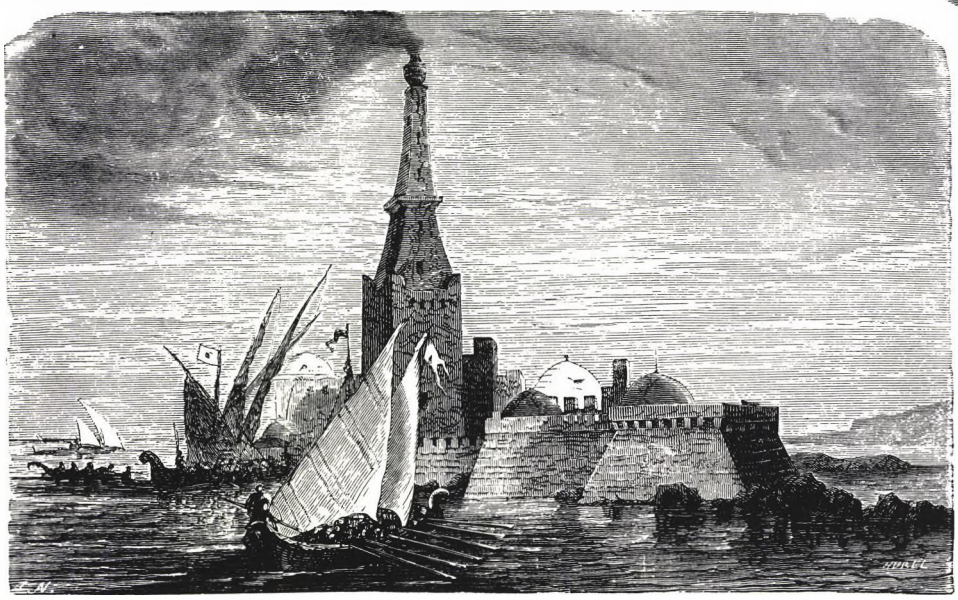
THE LIGHTHOUSE IN HISTORY

The first lighthouses recorded in antiquity were built about 1000 BC. Before that time, ancient navigators depended upon open fires built on high cliffs, which were lighted only when an incoming vessel was expected. In bad weather, when they were most needed, the beacons barely could be seen. As a result, many ships were wrecked and many early sailors lost their lives within sight of their ports of call. Clearly, a better system of warning signals was vitally needed. To help those early seafarers find their way safely to port, the first early lighthouses were built. Even then, it was recognized that two kinds of beacons were necessary - one that said *"Welcome Home"* and the other that signaled *"Danger - Keep Off"*

The first lighthouse for which we have a date goes back to 300 BC. Known as Pharos, it was built by the early Pharoahs about 247 BC, on an island off Alexandria, Egypt, at the mouth of the Nile River. Historians have described it as follows: *"Pharos was a small island washed on all sides by the sea, with a tower upon it with the same name as the island. Admirably constructed of white marble with several stories, Sostratus of Cindus. a friend of kings, erected it for the safety of mariners as the inscription imparts. For as the coast on each side is low and without harbors with reefs and shallows, an elevated and conspicuous mark is required to enable navigators coming from sea to direct their course exactly to the open harbor."* Ancient writers say that the light was 100 statures of man, or about 500 feet. It cost 800 talents, or about $2,500,000 in today's currency. In the upper chambers were windows facing the sea. Fires or torches lighted in these windows were reported to be visible a distance of 300 stadia, about thirty miles, on a clear night. It is also reported to have had a huge mirror, which reflected light visible for forty miles.

The Pharos Lighthouse was in operation for 1000 years, and survived as a landmark for another 500 years before it was destroyed by an earthquake. Like the Colossus of Rhodes, a 105-foot high bronze statue of Apollo which was also reportedly used as a lighthouse, Pharos was considered one of the *"Seven Wonders of the World"*. Many scholars believe that Pharos may have been responsible for the legend of the Great Cyclops, a mythical monster with one eye in the middle of his forehead.

Colossus of Rhodes - reportedly used in antiquity as a lighthouse.



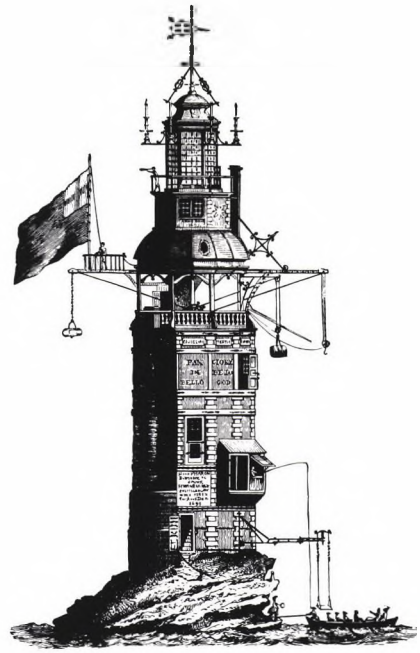
Pharos - the earliest recorded lighthouse, built about 300 BC. It stood off Alexandria, Egypt.

It was not until the 16th and 17th centuries that the English and the French began to build lighthouses that could compare with Pharos. In 1584, King Henry III ordered the construction of a tower on the island of Cordouan, off the port of Bordeaux. The elaborate structure, 197 feet high, took 27 years to build and was lighted for the first time in 1611.

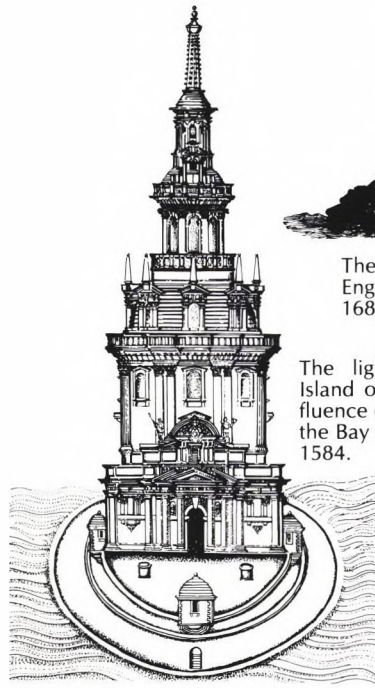
The most famous of the early English lighthouses was the Eddystone Lighthouse, built on the Eddystone Rocks in the English Channel near the port of Plymouth. Construction of the first light was started in 1696 by Henry Winstanley and was completed in 1698. This wooden structure, originally 60 feet high, was destroyed by a violent storm in 1703. Another was built in 1706, also of wood. It too was destroyed by fire in 1755.

The third Eddystone Light, built by John Smeaton and lighted in 1759, was eventually replaced by a higher structure in the 1850's. One hundred and thirty years later, this lighthouse is still standing.

The first lighthouse in the Americas was built at Vera Cruz, Mexico, late in the 17th century. No details of this structure are available. The first lighthouse in the British colonies was built in Boston Harbor in 1716. Very little is known about construction details, but the drawings show it to have been a tall, graceful stone tower. It was destroyed during the American Revolution by the Americans, to prevent its use by the British. A new Boston Light was built after the Revolution, and that building is still standing. The first lighthouse on Long Island was built in 1797 - the Montauk Light, which is described in greater detail in the story that follows.

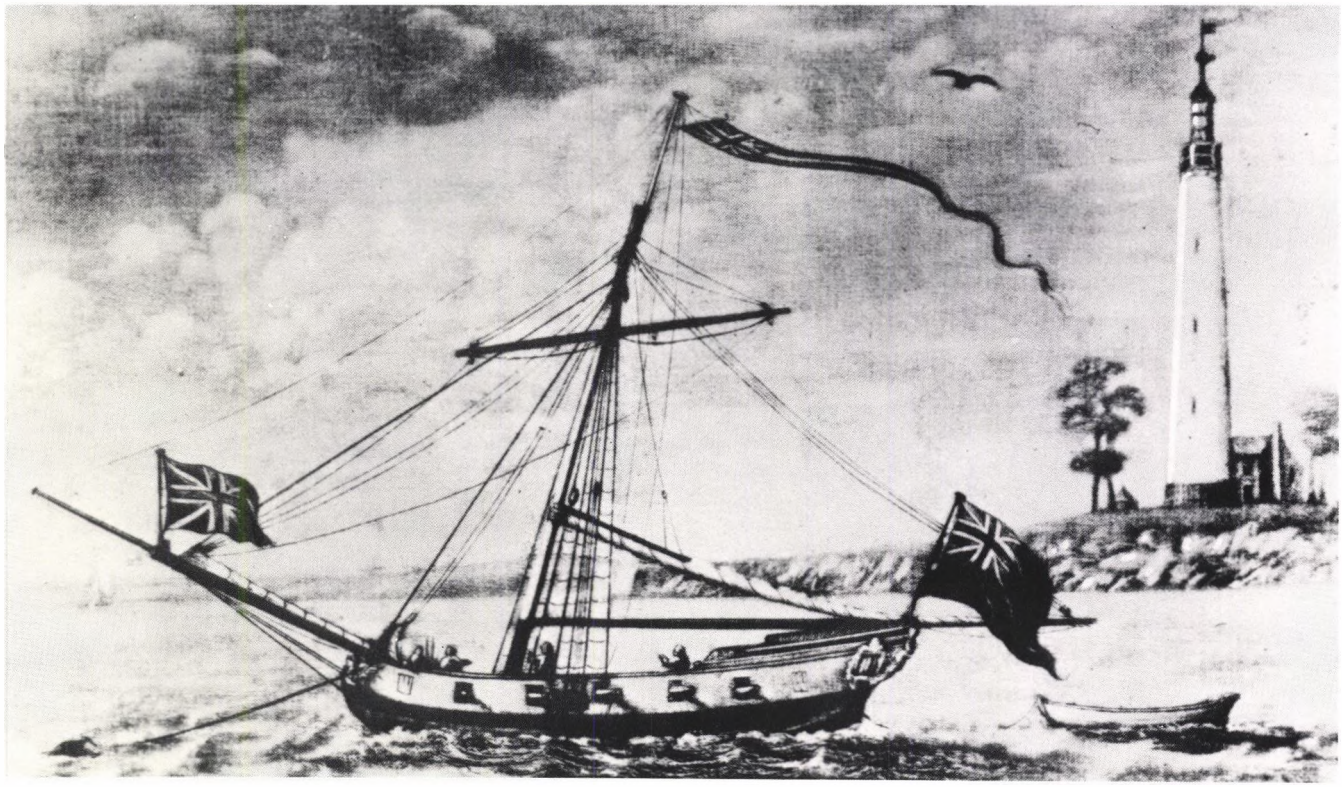


The Eddystone Lighthouse in the English Channel - completed in 1689.



The lighthouse on the French Island of Cordouan and the confluence of the River Gironde with the Bay of Biscay. It was started in 1584.

Drawing of the old Boston Light.



CHAPTER II

THE NEED FOR A LONG ISLAND LANDFALL MARK

The geological origins of that slender finger of sand that points its way generally westward from the Atlantic Ocean toward New York City have been lost in the dim shadows of antiquity. In all probability, the sand strip called Fire Island is but a hiccup - an after-thought of the great earth forces that millions of years ago rent the young planet, forming the great oceans. . .gouging out Long Island Sound and creating Long Island itself as an island off the continental mainland. Whatever their origins, the barrier beaches that stretch off-shore for miles parallel to the south shore, to this day perform an invaluable service to Long Island. From the earliest times, these barrier beaches have borne the brunt of the ocean's fury, standing before the howling winds and the buffeting seas of the Atlantic - shielding the main shore of Long Island. We can certainly assume that the coast of our Island would be completely different today had not the barrier beaches provided a buffer.

In all probability, Fire Island was a wild and desolate area before the coming of the white man. There were several Indian tribes living on Long Island itself, with a population of thousands. For the most part, the tribes made their homes closer to the north shore, where the sheltered waters of Long Island Sound provided an easy means of travel for their dugout canoes, and the regular tidal flows provided food for the Indian fishermen.

The Long Island Indians moved about from season to season. During the winter weather, they stayed close to the north shore area, where the north shore rivers and streams provided easier food and sustenance. There they founded their villages in the many sheltered coves and harbors, where fresh water was readily available, and the nearby forests teemed with game.

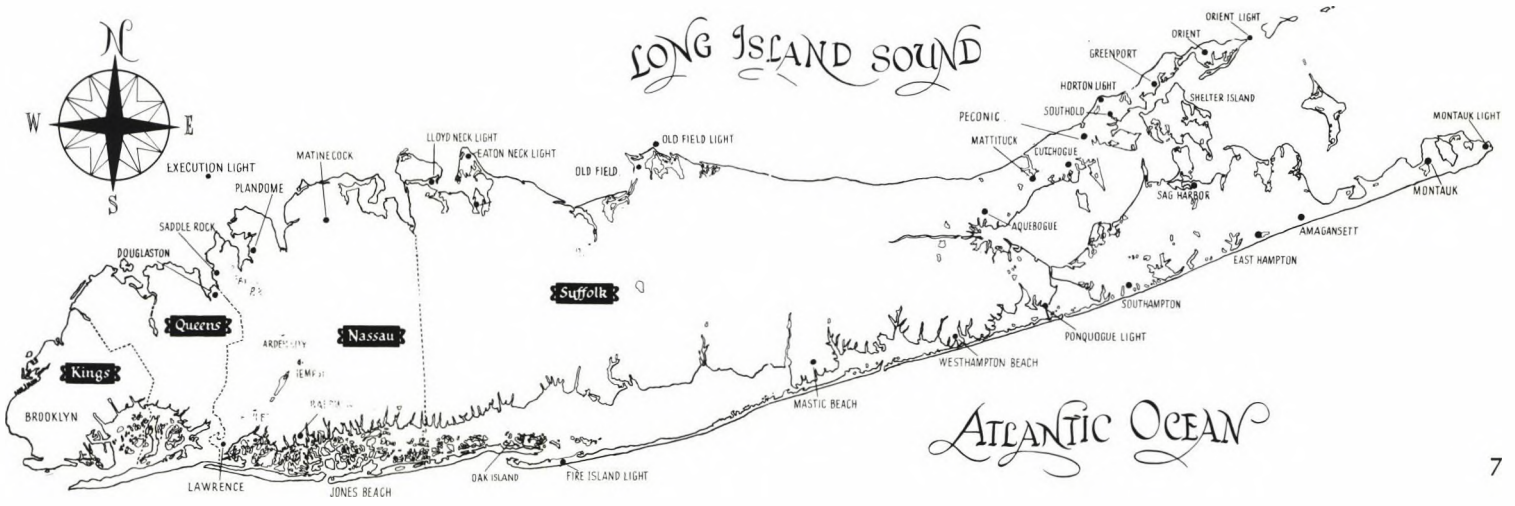
With the coming of the warm weather, the Indians would move inland toward the south shore, often on hunting trips that took them away from their homes for weeks at a time. They hunted in the central game forests, and were known to have sailed the waters of the Great South Bay. Undoubtedly, many an intrepid brave walked the lonely shores of Fire Island, gazing eastward toward the briny horizon.

In those days, whales were often sighted in Long Island waters - cavorting close to the shore and sending their spouts high into the air off the south shore beaches. Early accounts written by the first colonists tell of whale hunts by the Indians, who chased the great whales that came too close to shore. With clubs and spears, the Indians sought to drive them into the low water, where the whales would beach themselves and lie helpless to the spears of the hunters.

History provides us with precious little information about the first settlers to visit Fire Island. Scattered accounts of those early days tell about the off-shore whaling activities of the hardy colonists, who often hired Indian hands to help in hunting the whales. Some of the earliest records cite town laws that required those early whaling captains to pay the Indians a certain minimum rate, and forbade them to provide rum as payment.

So it was with this wildly beautiful, desolate sand strip. We might guess that some early Long Island farmer, pressed for grazing lands, might have brought over some herds of cattle and sheep to the green parts of Fire Island, to feed and graze during the summer weather. However, the difficulty in transporting herds of animals across the expanse of the Great South Bay in all probability kept habitation on Fire Island to a minimum.

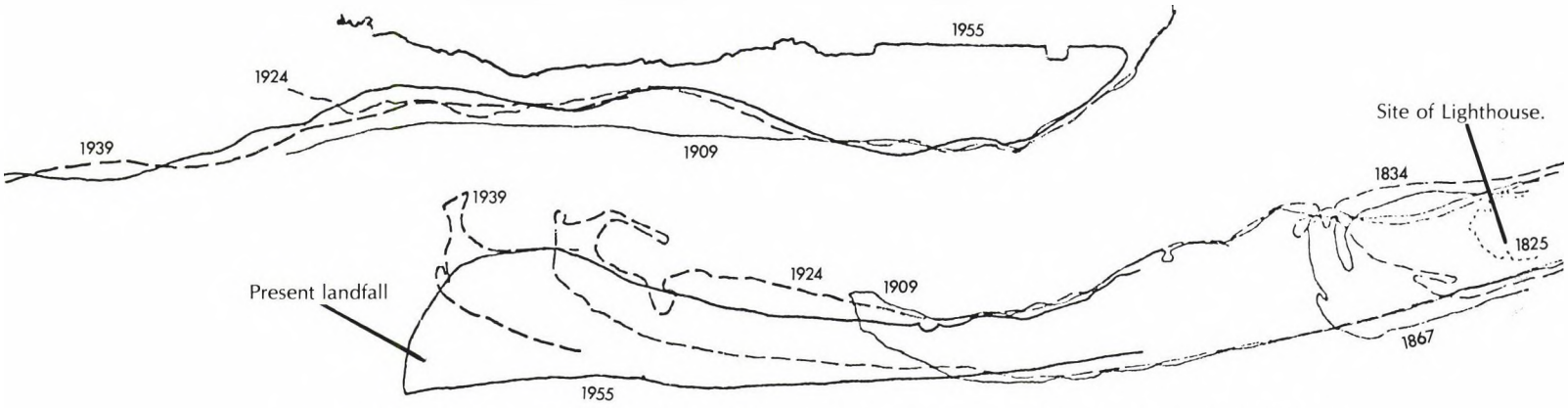
In the early days of America's history, Boston was the continent's major seaport, and the trading ships of the English settlers, and the Spanish, Dutch and Italian traders, marked their courses for New England. The sandy shores of Long Island saw little of the trickle of early sea traffic to the New World. However, history was preparing great changes - and Fire Island was to figure in them.



PARTIAL RECORD OF SHIPWRECKS ON THE SOUTH SHORE OF LONG ISLAND BETWEEN 1808 AND 1825

Dec. 20, 1808	Brig, Fox, Captain Daggett, Philadelphia for Boston, East Hampton, cargo saved.
Dec., 1809	Schooner Dolly, Captain Richards of Kingston, Mass., bound Boston to Baltimore; on fire at Southampton; crew of ten left in long boat; vessel total wreck; cargo rum, hemp, fruit.
March, 1810	Ship, Hudson, Captain Spink, from Isle of May to Newport; South Beach near Moriches; cargo salt, probably total loss.
1813	Brig, Name unknown, off Old Inlet, Bellport.
1814	Sloop, Woodcock, owned and built by U.S. Senator John Smith; Fire Island; burned by British sloop-of-war Nimrod of fleet blockading Long Island in War of 1812.
Sept. 3-5, 1821	Vessel, Name unknown, owned by Captain Spencer; lost Patchogue.
Sept. 23, 1815	Schooner, Gloriana; Bellport; eight other vessels in same locality lost in storm, twenty-one men lost.
Nov. 5, 1821	Ship, Savannah; Fire Island; bound from Savannah, Georgia, to N.Y.; eleven (all on board) lost; vessel total loss.
Dec. 25, 1824	French ship, Nestor; Fire Island; ship total loss, cargo of dry goods.

Former locations of Fire Island Inlet between 1825 and 1955



Over the last 150 years, the landfall on Fire Island Inlet has traveled westward several miles. Once right at the point, the Fire Island Light is now some 5 miles from the western tip of the Inlet.

CHAPTER III

THE LONG ISLAND LANDFALL EMERGES

After the American Revolution, the United States began to develop as a symbol of hope and opportunity for all the world. In numbers that were to increase for a century, ships from the Old World carried immigrants and goods to a rapidly growing America. With its great natural harbor and its waterways leading into the interior, New York City and Philadelphia soon supplanted Boston as the busiest port in the United States - and the first landfall for the ocean-going sailing vessels of the day were the shores of Long Island. On the seas for weeks and months at a time, the crews of sailing vessels and their passengers must have waited with hungry eyes and tense hearts for the sight of their first land-fall in the New World. For many of them, that first land-fall was the eastern tip of Fire Island!

However, the land-fall was as much a menace as a welcome. Perhaps approaching by night or in a fog or heavy seas, many a ship's master could easily fail to spot the low-lying strip of sand just offshore. No man today can say how many of these early ships ran aground on the sandy shoals off Fire Island, to founder and break apart in the pounding surf - snuffing out the lives and hopes of passengers and crew in unseen and unheard tragedies.

The nature and location of the barrier beaches themselves were dimly known and little understood by the European sea captains. Further, the sand bars that built up a few miles off the barrier beaches were forever shifting with the ever-changing ocean currents - a constant menace to unwary travellers nearing the coast.

There are accounts of *"land pirates"* that made their way across the Great South Bay to patrol the lonely Fire Island barrier beach in search of salvage. There are stories of rugged colonists hiking across the winter ice of the Great South Bay to pry salvage from the wrecks that had been driven ashore to break up in the pounding surf. How many bottoms were lost, how many souls gave up their lives in a vain effort to reach the New World, will never be known.

However, it quickly became obvious to the fledgling government of the United States that some method had to be devised to help ships crossing the ocean to find their way safely to New York Harbor. In this country, the first recorded act of Congress relating to lighthouses was passed on August 7, 1789. It provided that *"all expenses which shall accrue from and after August 15, 1789 in the necessary support, maintenance and repairs of all lighthouses, beacons, buoys and public piers shall be defrayed out of the Treasury of the United States."* On March 26, 1790, the same words were enacted but with a proviso that *"none of the said expense shall be continued to be defrayed by the United States after the expiration of one year from the day aforesaid unless such lighthouses, beacons, buoys and public piers, shall in the meantime be ceded to and vested in the United States by the State or States respectively in which the land and tenements thereunto belonging and together with the jurisdiction of the same."*

Because of the great need for a lighthouse on Long Island, President George Washington signed the order for the establishment of a lighthouse at Montauk Point in 1795, but only after New York State had ceded the land, then called Turtle Hill, to the federal govern ment. The Montauk Lighthouse, completed in 1797 at a cost of $22,300, is 28 feet in diameter, octagonal shape, and 80 feet high.

The Montauk Lighthouse was a giant step forward, but it was only a partial answer to the problem. The real need was for a series of lights all the way down the east coast. Almost immediately, there were indications that another light was necessary on the south shore of Long Island, if ships were to be guided safely into New York Harbor. Many ship's captains tried to plan their voyages so that they would approach the unfamiliar Long Island coast during the day. With the unpredictability of wind and tide, this was not always possible. Often those early ships, with primitive navigation gear, approaching the coast in bad weather after weeks crossing the Atlantic, had no idea of their position. They were often without a point of reference. Many a ship, with passengers, crew and cargo, vanished in the night in those uncharted Long Island waters.

Although admittedly incomplete, there are records of many wrecked vessels that foundered in Long Island waters during the late 1700's and early 1800's. Perhaps the one that finally convinced the Congress that a lighthouse at Fire Island was urgently needed was the wreck of the Savannah. It went aground on Fire Island Beach on November 5, 1821, with the loss of the vessel and the entire crew of 11 people.

Shipowners clamored for a light at Fire Island, to mark the inlet into Great South Bay where a ship could find a haven in bad weather. Too, Fire Island was about midway down the Long Island coast from Montauk to the Sandy Hook Light. On March 3, 1825, Congress appropriated money for the purchase of land on the westerly end of Fire Island and for the construction of the original Fire Island lighthouse. The amount. . . $10,000!

Artist's conception of the first Fire Island Light, which was dismantled. This drawing was prepared by Mrs. Etta Guthy, with the help of her husband. Working together, they reviewed the plans for the First Fire Island Light and created this drawing from the engineering specifications.

THE FIRST FIRE ISLAND LIGHT

In a letter written on June 15, 1825 Jonathan Thompson, the Federal Superintendent of Lighthouses, describes the purchase of the property on the east side of the Fire Island Inlet.

"Because I was unable to obtain a title to the land by purchase as there was doubt who were, if any person was the owner, therefore, I made application to the State Legislature for a cession of the jurisdiction over it and for Commissioners to approve the value of the land at fifty dollars, which I have paid and have received for the United States a certified copy of the Act and a duplicate of the appraisement, which has been recorded, all of which makes a good and sufficient title to the land."

A map of the property, surveyed by Daniel Ewen, City Surveyor, in April 1825, shows the property to be 32 chains (2112 feet; one chain = 66 feet) from low water on the ocean side to low water on the bay side and extending westward about 20 chains. The map shows the lighthouse on the southwest corner of the property about 120 feet from the shoreline.

Superintendent Thompson also notified contractors that *"proposals to build a lighthouse and dwelling house would be received until July 15 next of the following dimensions, materials and description. The Light House is to be an Octagonal Pyramid to be built of Connecticut River blue split stone and the best quick lime and sand mortar, the foundation wall to be seven feet thick from the base to the water table, and tapered to two feet six inches at the top of the pyramid; the height of the building to be seventy-four feet above the water table to the bottom of the lantern, thirty-two feet diameter at the water table, and sixteen feet diameter at the top of the pyramid; the foundation to be layers of square timber, thirty-four feet in length, placed transversely, six feet below the surface, and the water to be three feet above the surface; the water table to be of hewn stone, sloping at the top, a strong and substantial pannelled door, three feet wide and lock thereon, hung upon strong hinges, well secured in the wall, in the first story, the flooring of which to be paved with large flat stone at the water table, the stories to be not more than nine feet, nor less than seven feet in the clear; the floorings to be supported with strong sound timber, and floored with one and a half inch plank, grooved together; the stairs to be of easy ascent, and made substantially of plank and railed; six windows on the tower, three of which on the west, and three on the east side, with durable window frames and sashes, the sashes to be glazed with glass, 10 by 12 inches, of double thickness, four panes in each sash, and two sashes to the window; the doors and windows to have cut stone sills and lentils; the top of the tower to be arched over, leaving a scuttle on one side, of two feet three inches by three feet three inches in the clear; an iron frame around the same, and a door framed with iron and covered with copper, leaving also a well with an iron frame, about two feet square, which is to be left in all the floorings; to have a cut stone cornice of large stone, projecting over the top of the wall of the pyramid, on which wall and arch, a cut stone deck of four inches thick is to be laid and the stones secured together with iron clamps, the joints of stone and clamps to be filled in with lead a complete iron lantern, octagon form, the posts of which to be of wrought iron, to be two and a half inches square, to run six feet into the stone work and to be there secured with eight large iron anchors; the lantern to be twelve feet diameter and the posts eight feet in height above the platform of the pyramid on which it is to rest; an iron plate to be framed on the top of the posts, and to be well braced and secured above with iron, the space between the posts at the angles to be occupied by the sashes which are to be of iron, moulded on the inside, struck solid, and of sufficient strength, so as not to work with the wind; each sash to be glazed with white plate glass, ten by twelve inches, and one fifth of an inch in thickness; on the west side, part of the sash is to be hung and fitted as a door, to go out on the platform; the lantern to be surrounded by an iron balustrade, three feet high, each rail or rod to be an inch square, which is to be securely braced; the top of the lantern is to be a dome five feet high, water tight, and covered with copper, thirty two ounces to the square foot, formed by sixteen iron rafters, concentrated in an iron hoop at the top, which forms the funnel for the smoke to pass out of the lantern into the ventilator, made of copper in the form of a ball, sufficient to contain forty gallons, and large enough to secure the funnel against rain; the ventilator to be turned by a large vane, so that the hole for venting the smoke may always be to leeward; the lantern and ballustrade to be covered with three coats of black paint; the door, sashes, window frames, to be well painted with two coats of paint, and the building to be well pointed with cement, and white washed twice over, inside and outside, and furnished with two complete electrical rods, with points to each; and in every respect, to be completely built with best materials and workmanship. . . .*

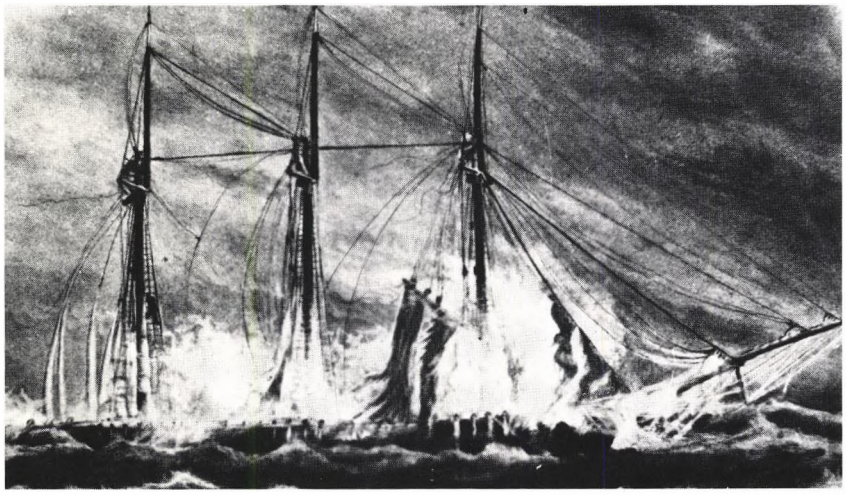
A well to be sunk, of four feet diameter inside, of sufficient depth to procure good water, at a convenient distance from the house, to be stoned, and furnished with a curb, windlass, an iron chain, and a strong bucket and a suitable house over the well. The Light House and Dwelling to be completed by the first day of the December next.

Separate proposals will be received for fitting the said Light House, within one month after it shall be built, with eighteen patent lamps and plated Reflectors, highly burnished, and all the necessary apparatus to make the same complete; the lights are to be fitted up on the most approved revolving plan; eight double tin butts, with sheet iron covers of eighty gallons capacity each for keeping the oil, The whole to be approved by the Superintendent of the establishment, or such other person as may be designated by him."

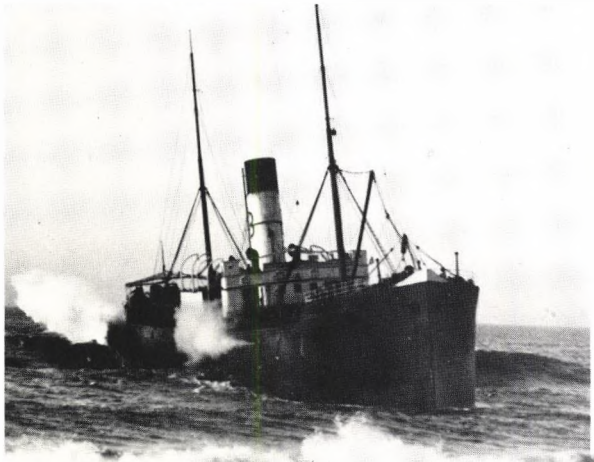
While the exact dates of construction are not shown in the records, it has been established that work was completed and the Light in operation in late 1826. It is also recorded that while the original appropriation was for $10,000, the total cost of the lighthouse, the dwelling, the well and the lamps was $9,999.65. The .35¢ was carried in *"surplus funds"*.

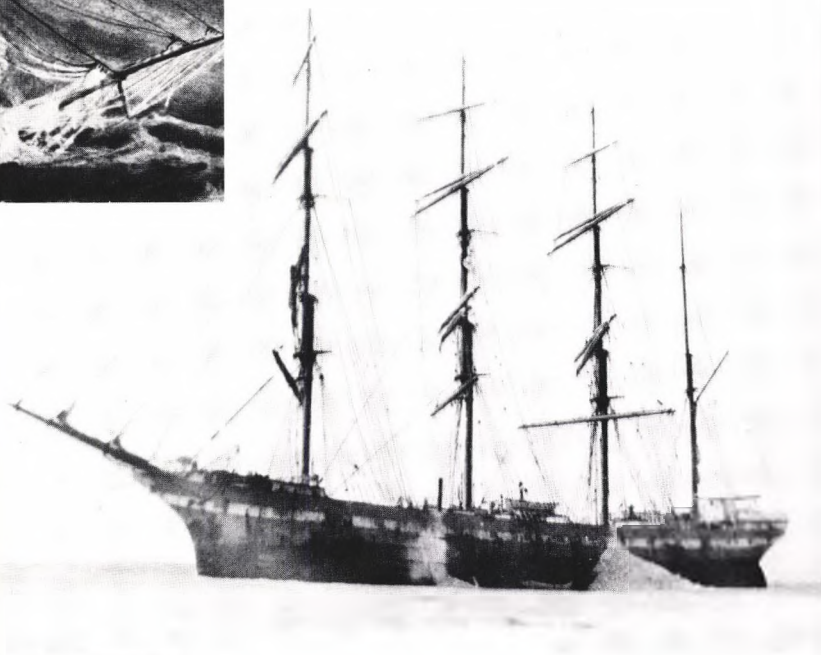
As indicated in the specifications, the lighthouse was originally equipped with *"eighteen lamps and burnished reflectors,"* and according to the records, was visable for 27 nautical miles. It was equipped with the *"most approved revolving plan,"* which caused the lamps to make a complete revolution in one minute and thirty seconds. It consisted of a weight attached to a cable that was hand cranked every four hours by the keeper to bring the weight up to the top of the tower. A governor mechanism controlled the revolution of the lamps.

In 1842, the lamp arrangement was changed to 14 lamps and 21 reflectors with visibility reduced to 22 miles. There is no explanation for this. Perhaps it was an early governmental economy move.



Artist's conception of the sinking of the Louis V. Place - wrecked in winter off Fire Island. Of the two crew members rescued, one survived.





The Bark Hougemont ran aground on the barrier beach in 1917. Note where the crew evidently tried to lighten the ship by dumping the cargo over the side.

The Vincenzo Bonanno, aground off Fire Island.

CHAPTER V

THE LIFESAVING SERVICE AND THE L.I. PIRATES

Since its earliest days, the United States has had a strong maritime tradition. The infant colonies depended upon England and the countries of Europe to transport across the turbulent Atlantic the material and the men needed to settle the new land. In later years, the great seaports of the East Coast, dominated by Boston, Philadelphia and eventually New York, became the gateway to America for the hungry and the hopeful of Europe. Through these gateways came not only the people and the machines that were to make America great, but also the finery and culture that was to enhance its quality of life. However, the hazards of the Atlantic crossing were many. Not the least of them was to get safely by the Long Island barrier beaches, and make the safety of New York harbor.

In 1850, the Barque ELIZABETH, a 500-ton ship sailing from Rome, went down off Fire Island. The captain had mistaken the Fire Island light for that of Cape May and lost his ship in a fierce July gale. A writer of the day, Nathaniel Prime, summed up the dangers of sailing along the South Shore:

"In the whole length of the island there are but ten openings in the Great Beach and these are constantly varying, by the violence of the waves, so that after a single storm, the channel, which is never deep, may be materially obstructed or changed. This necessarily renders the coasting business on the whole south side exceedingly uncertain and precarious; and at the same time accounts for those awful disasters which have so often been attended with the most appalling consequences on this ill-fated shore. From Coney Island to Montauk Point, there is not the vestige of a harbor that can be entered by a sea-vessel. If, therefore, by mistake of reckoning, or other cause, a ship is brought near the coast, with a strong bearing on shore, or a breeze too light to beat off, her doom is usually sealed."

The young nation was very much aware of its dependence upon the sea for trade and traffic, and concerned about the hazards of the Long Island coastline. Just a few years before the ELIZABETH was wrecked in March 1847, Congress had appropriated $5,000, with an additional $10,000 the following year, to establish voluntary lifesaving patrols on Long Island and New Jersey beaches.

These volunteer crews were supposed to keep vigil along the shore at night, ready to spring into action to aid ships in distress. Even though these volunteers didn't always cover the beaches well, it is estimated that, during the winter of 1850, many lives were saved by the prompt, vigorous action of the so-called surfmen. A surf-car (or life-car) was invented by Captain Douglas Ottinger of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, and was first put into use in 1849. This was a small bucket-type receptacle big enough to hold a man, with a trolley wheel on top. When a vessel foundered off shore, the lifesaver team shot a line out to the ship, which the crew hauled in. The surf-car was then hauled out to the ship, and passengers and crew could be hauled ashore.

This voluntary lifesaving service actually formalized a voluntary *"spyglass patrol"* that had existed for years. Men and women who lived by the sea were always ready to help, and at the signal - perhaps a horn blown into the night and passed on by the next neighbor - would bring the volunteers from their fields or roust them from their beds to do what they could to help a vessel in trouble.

One of the early lifesaving stations was set up adjacent to the first Fire Island lighthouse, a predecessor to the Coast Guard station that has been adjacent to the Fire Island Light down through the years. In time, the voluntary surfmen evolved into a paid organization known as the U.S. Life-Saving Service. In 1915, it was merged with the U.S. Coast Guard.

The daily existence of a life saver combined hours of loneliness and boredom patrolling the beaches in the dark summer night and in the bone-chilling winter blackness - with moments of tension, peril and exhilaration as they fought to save a ship and the lives of its passengers and crew.

In the early days of this century, the U.S. Life-Saving Service was concerned not only with the large ships crossing the ocean from Europe, but with the growing fleet of schooners and sloops running in and out of the Fire Island Inlet daily throughout the year, bringing coal and building materials to growing Long Island communities. Because of the ever-shifting channels, many of these vessels became grounded, even in good weather. The Life-Savers would board the stranded vessel and jettison the deck load, in order to float the vessel. Often, for hours they would shovel bluestone or coal into the sea, to lighten the vessel so they could tow it out to deep water with the rising tide. However, with all their skill and determination, many a vessel lost her bottom and was pounded to pieces in the driving surf.

In the early 1900's, the Life-Saving Service used long, steel surfboats, powered by 16-foot oars wielded by the surfmen. Clad in their oilskins, it was not uncommon for them to have to fight their way through surf, sea and wind for hours, struggling to reach a wreck. At night, often they could not see the vessel, and had to judge its location by the sound of the waves striking its

hull. The wet and dampness soaked them through, as they bent over their oars and bulled their way through the raging surf. One of the hazards of their trade was the blisters that were raised on their posteriors. Many of these early lifesavers learned to row in a half-standing position. It was a life for the hardy and adventurous.

Captain J. Sim Baker, reminiscing in a recent LONG ISLAND FORUM issue, wrote: *"We went to a schooner one January, boarded her, ran out the anchor and unloaded all the bluestone cargo we could get rid of, as it was frozen solid. The other two young members of the crew and I then climbed out on the main boom, opened up the sail, crawled in beneath the layers of heavy canvas and were soon sound asleep.*

"Spray flying over the schooner froze as it hit and soon one of the older crew members, looking aft at the furled sail, realized that we young surfmen were sealed in an icy cocoon and that soon it would be impossible for us to get air, as the sail was becoming more ice laden by the minute.

"He grabbed an oar from the surfboat and, calling upon two other crew members, began breaking the sail loose so that we could climb out, and reach the deck. The oars swinging against the icy sail broke the edges loose, and at the same time, gave us the worst beating I have ever had, but it is certain that if the older men had not rescued us we would have smothered. Needless to say, I never crept into another sail when ice was forming."

His words also give us some of the flavor of that lonely existence. *"Night patrol was a lonely duty, two-and-a-half miles to the halfway house through sand. Often through deep grass and snow. Sometimes forced to wade gullies at high tide through which the sea poured after every breaking wave. There are cases on record, where the surfman in attempting to cross these low spots, stepped into quicksand or was hit by floating logs. If he fell and was drowned, the body might be recovered miles away, across the beach where the tide carried it.*

"When patrolling the beach in fog and darkness the surfmen did not depend altogether upon a stranded vessel's signal of distress. Some vessels would lose their bearings, become grounded on the outer bar, and the skipper would not send signals, hoping to refloat his vessel without aid, which they were sometimes able to do. The captains of these vessels did not realize that the man patrolling the beach could tell by the interruption of the regular wave pattern, which subconsciously he watched, and the change in the sound of the breakers on the outer bar, that a ship was lying there. Sometimes it was the sound of a sail flapping in the wind, the creaking of gear on the ship, or the sound of distant voices, carried on the wind. When the patrolling surfman knew to a certainty that a ship was stranded, even though he could not see her in the fog and dark, he would burn a red flare to let the sailors know that assistance was at hand. He would then proceed to the half-way house and telephone or, if closer to the station, hurry there and give the alarm."

The Life-Savers employed two life-saving techniques: either reaching the stranded vessel by surfboat, or by firing a breeches buoy line out to the stranded crew.

A small cannon - called a Lyle Gun - was used to hurl a 19-lb. steel cylinder seaward, trailing with it a light rope that would be a lifeline for the men out at sea on the shoals.

Those aboard the vessel would haul in the line, and make fast the hawser - the heavy rope that would carry the breeches buoy. The Life-Savers on the beach watched with bated breath, as the hawser would sag as the ship rolled toward the beach and then grow taut as it was tossed the other way. At a signal from the ship, the men would bow their backs and pull the buoy in towards the shore, never knowing what they would be pulling out of the darkness.

In 1896, a cautious English skipper sent the first load ashore to test the safety of the breeches buoy - a Shetland pony. Many a life was saved by the Life-Saving crew as they lived their lonely, hazardous and hardy existence. There were also many mornings when they found parts of ships, cargo, fresh fruit, and bodies on the beach, with no hint of the identity of the ship lost in the night.

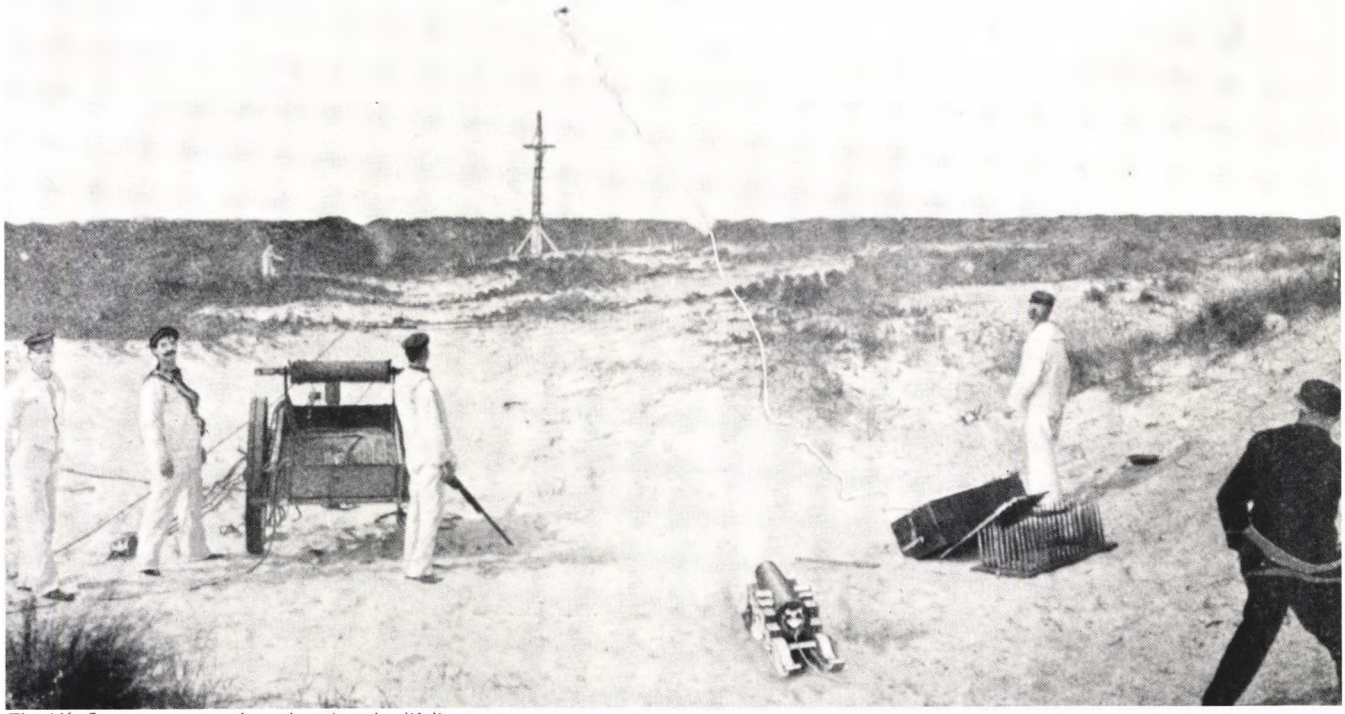
Fire Island is not without some unsavory chapters to its history as well. There are stories of shadowy figures that set bright fires on the beaches at night to entice ships toward the shore where they would go aground on the shoals. The land pirates would then race each other to plunder the trapped ships. Other sand pirates, on hearing of a wreck on Fire Island shoals, would sail across from the mainland to snatch what they could from the beaches or even from those working to rescue the cargo of the vessel.

The sea is a stern taskmaster, no less now than it was 300 years ago. There are many tales untold and many dramas that have been played out unseen beneath the beam of the Fire Island Light.

A Life Saver on beach patrol.

U.S. Life Saving Station at Oak Island Beach, N.Y. about 1911.

Captain Ed Baker and his Life Saver crew launch into the surf.



The Life Saver crew practices shooting the lifeline.

The Life Savers head out to the grounded Princess Irene, off Fire Island.

Captain "Sim" Baker (l.), son Ed Baker (c.), and an unidentified third man rest on the beach during a rescue operation. In the background is the grounded steamer, Vincenzo Bonanno.

The Fire Island Light as it is today - in need of care and maintenance.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND (Present) FIRE ISLAND LIGHT

There is very little material available as to the reason for replacing the original lighthouse, after only 30 years of operation, with the much larger present structure. Some evidence indicates that the original structure was not tall enough for its beam to be seen far enough to give the required protection to ships at sea. We also know that the first lighthouse did not stand up well to the fierce elements of wind and sea.

It is well documented that many shipwrecks continued to occur along the entire south shore of Long Island after the first light was placed in operation at Fire Island in 1826. The barque ELIZABETH was wrecked near Point of Woods with a loss of ten people on July 19, 1850. Among the victims was Margaret Fuller, a well known writer, her husband, Giovanni Ossoli, an Italian Count, and their young son. *"It is a time that the United States, instead of keeping troops and forts, should keep a coast guard of lighthouses to defend lives and property"*, Ralph Waldo Emerson is quoted as saying. William Ellery Channing exclaimed, *"Was this thy welcome home, a howling hurricane, a pitiless sea, a wreck on a sand bar?"* There is some indication that the captain of the ELIZABETH mistook the Fire Island Light for the Cape May Light. In any case, pressure increased for upgrading of the system of Long Island lighthouses.

Until 1852, the lighthouses were under superintendence of the Fifth Auditor of the Treasury, who had other matters to attend to and who himself was not chosen as an expert in lighthouses, construction or maintenance. Because of the constant complaints about the deficiencies of our lighthouse system, a commission was sent to Europe to inquire into the management of lighthouses there. As a result of their report, a Lighthouse Board was created by an Act of Congress in 1852. This board consisted of two naval officers, one officer of the Engineers Corps, and two civilians with engineering backgrounds. The Board was charged with the erection, repair and maintenance of all lighthouses, light ships and buoys, with reducing the navigational risks, and with making American harbors more accessible.

The Lighthouse Board moved quickly to upgrade the light service from one of the worst in the world to one of the best. Congress voted funds for the most modern structures, with the latest improvements in lenses, reflectors and lamps. The whole coastal situation was restudied, and a decision made to provide better coverage on the south shore of Long Island by building the Ponquoque Light at Shinnecock, which went into operation on January 1, 1858, and to rebuilding the Fire Island Light with a much higher structure and a more powerful light.

On March 3, 1857, Congress appropriated $40,000 for the construction of a new Fire Island lighthouse, to be 168 feet high! It was to have a first-order Fresnel light, which would be visible for at least 21 miles at sea. Construction of the light, which stands today, was started in 1857. It went into operation on November 1, 1858.

The notice to Mariners, dated July 3, 1858, gave notice that *"On the evening of Monday, the 1st day of November next, a first order revolving light will be exhibited for the first time, and on every night thereafter from sunset to sunrise, from the light-house tower now in course of erection at Fire Island Beach, east side of Fire Island inlet, south side of Long Island, N.Y. The illuminating apparatus is of the first order revolving catadioptric of the system of Fresnel, and will produce a brilliant flash once in every minute, which will not be materially different in appearance from the existing light in the old tower at that place, except in the greater brightness of the flash and increased range of the new light.*

The light-house tower which is placed about 200 feet N.E. from the old light-house tower, is built of brick, will be 150 feet in height, of cream or yellow color, and the light will be about 166 feet above the mean level of the sea.

The old light-house tower and keepers' dwelling will be removed immediately after the exhibition of the light from the new tower. The new light should be seen in ordinary states of the atmosphere, from the deck of a vessel 15 feet above the water, from 21 to 23 nautical miles.

Approximate position of the new light-house tower:

Latitude, 40° 37′ 53″ North

Longitude, 73° 12′ 51″ West.

Distances from Fire Island Light-house to -

Montauk Point Light-house, 67½ nautical miles

Great West Bay Light-house, 35 nautical miles

Sandy Hook Light Vessel, 31 nautical miles

Navesink Lights, 37½ nautical miles

Barnegat Light-house, 66 nautical miles

By order of the Light-house Board:
J. St. C. Morton,
U.S. Corps Engineers"

The new light is built on a stone pier that is 100 feet by 150 feet. It is constructed of brick, circular in shape, with the walls at the base almost 11 feet thick, tapering to 2½ feet at the parapet. The staircase and railing are iron, with nine landings. The parapet platform is of granite with an iron railing. The lamps

were similar to those used in the original lighthouse and are fourteen in number, with 21 inch reflectors. The improvement in the illuminating apparatus was the installation of a first-order Fresnel system, which greatly increased the intensity of the light. The Fresnel system consisted of surrounding the lamp with a series of prismatic rings of glass, all cut mathematically so that all of the rays were bent to go out in one plane.

The engineers in charge of construction wrote many interesting letters to the Secretary of the Light House Board.

As early as April 8, 1857, Lieutenant J. C. Duane was expressing concern over the problems of building a tower of the approved height: *"Even if brick were to be employed this material does not appear to me to be adapted to a work of such importance in such an exposed situation. I would, therefore, recommend that stone be used in this case. The present appropriation would be sufficient to build the tower and probably the lantern, leaving the apparatus to be purchased from a new appropriation or some other source."* No response to Lt. Duane's letter is to be found. However, since the tower was built of brick, the answer is obvious. In an estimate, dated June 1, 1857, Lieut. Duane itemizes the cost of building using 800,000 bricks.

New York, June 1, 1857

Estimate of cost of Light House at Fire Island

800,000 Brick	$8,000.
1,200 lbs. Cement	1,500.
Stone for Foundation	2,820.
Concrete for Foundation (650 yds.)	3,250.
Stone Steps 160	1,600.
Stone for Cornice 500 ft.	500.
Post Iron	1,000.
Stone Floors	300.
Wrought Iron Ladders, Railing	200.
Work Masons 1610 days	4,000.
Work Carpenters 250 days	500.
Work Stone Cutters	375.
Work Blacksmith	300.
Work Laborers	2,500.
Freight	4,000.
Machinery Tools, etc.	1,500.
	$32,345.

J. C. Duane
Lieut. of Engineers

Construction was started in the early summer of 1857. It was halted in bad weather in early December, after most of the concrete filling of the foundation had been completed. On April 9, 1858, Lieut. J. T. Morton, who had replaced Lieut. Duane, found indications that the concrete used in the foundation was unreliable, and expressed concern that cracking and disfigurement of the tower might occur. To insure against this, Lieut. Morton doubled the number of iron bands which were imbedded in the lower ten feet of the tower. He felt that these bands would effectively prevent any spreading or cracking of the base and would maintain the integrity of the tower.

Progress continued during the summer of '58 on schedule. However, because money and materials were depleted, Lieut. Morton wrote the following letter to Capt. William Franklin, Secretary of the Light House Board.

August 16th

Capt. Wm. B. Franklin
Secy., Lt. House Board
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

I believe it is your intention to have the old Tower and Dwelling at Fire Island torn down on the 1st of November next.

I have therefore proposed to tear down the stone part of the dwelling at once, in order to use the stone in building the foundation of the new Dwelling.

The old Tower will furnish the stone for the superstructure of the new Dwelling, but it will of course not come in play this season.

The light keepers can live in the workmen's shanty this winter and I will have it made perfectly tight and comfortable for them. The Oil Room shall be built next to the tower of brick, as there will be enough for that left; the oil room forms a part of the new Dwelling, but I can build it sufficiently to answer the purpose, with a temporary roof, during the winter.

The above arrangement seems the best I can make, and there is but one objection to it.

The present keeper is disinclined to live in the frame part of this house till he moves into the shanty. In this he is wrong, as the frame is comfortable enough except in winter; and when that comes he can move into a good tight shanty, nearly as convenient as his house.

Should you approve of my arrangements, I would request that the keeper may have orders to move out of the stone part of his house at once.

I am Sir,
Very respectfully,
Your obed. servt.
J. T. Morton"

The keeper was ordered to comply and he was moved into the workmen's shanty before the snow.

Because the tower was constructed of brick, it was necessary to coat the structure with a cement wash, to make it impervious to water. Accordingly, two coats of a cream yellow cement wash about 1/8 inch

thick were applied. (It was not until August 4, 1891 that it was changed to the present black and white colors, and a notice to Mariners was issued).

On September 30, 1858, in a hand-written report to the Light House Board by the 3rd Lighthouse District, the story of the completion of construction is detailed.

FIRE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

"There has been performed the most important work which I have been charged with viz: the erection of a 1st order Light House Tower, and Keeper's dwelling.

The tower is of brick, with a granite cornice, and rests upon a foundation of concrete faced with granite. There is a map of concrete under all of the above, which is 6 feet thick and 50 feet in diameter, and thus give an ample bearing and support to the superstructure.

The bed of this concrete is about a foot below low water, and the brick work of the tower commences at the level of 14 feet above mean tide.

From the foot of the tower proper to the top of the cornice is 140 feet, and the focal plane of the lens is 12 feet above the last mentioned level, so that the light is about 166 feet above the mean level of the sea.

A substantial stone dwelling of one story and attic has also been built containing a large oil room, and separate quarters for 3 keepers and their families. This communicates with the tower, and with the exterior as well as with the main hall of the dwelling. There is a terrace around the entire premises, which is embarked to the level of 13 feet above mean tide. This terrace is retained by a wall of dry stone masonry, the material of which were obtained from the demolition of the old tower and keepers house.

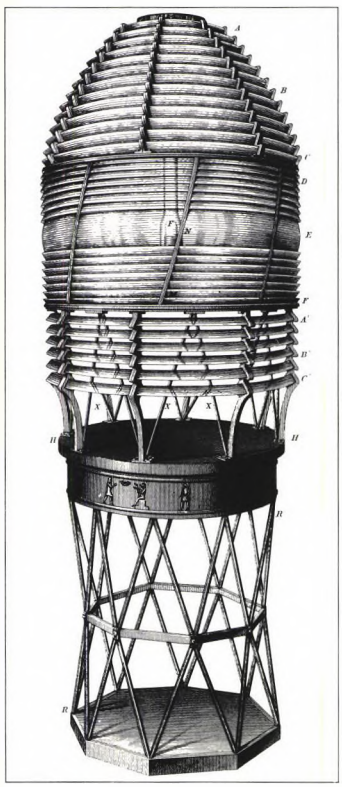
The tower is round and tapers very rapidly below, the bottom however diminishes until the upper portion runs up nearly cylindrical. The curve used to determine this shape was a hyperbolar.

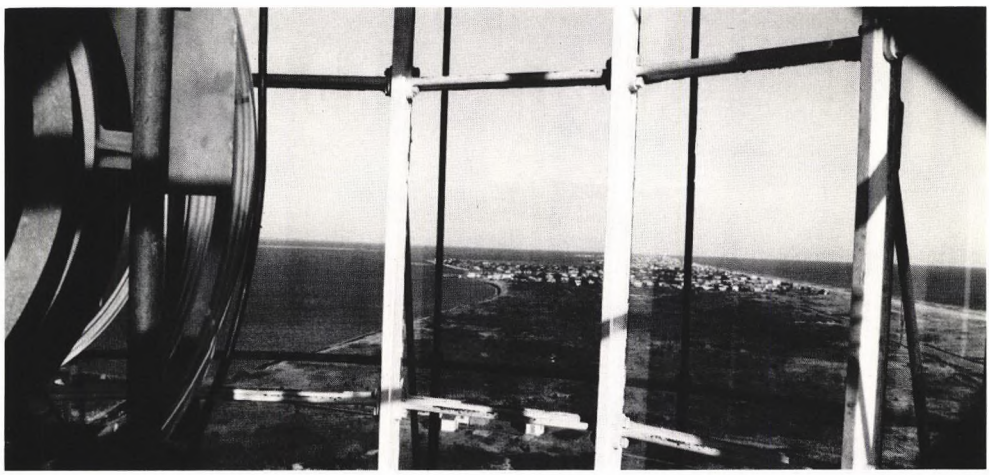
The cornice is of Doric order, and is joined to the tower by six pilasters which spring vertically from the inclined face of the tower.

The tower is ascended by spiral stairs; the tread of cast iron open work, rest on wrought iron pieces, and these are supported by the cylindrical wall of the Tower and by a cast iron central hollow column.

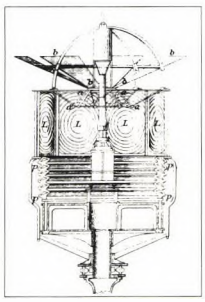
The tower is fitted with an illuminating apparatus of the 1st order revolving catadiptric of the system of Fresnel, which produces a brilliant flash (of white light) once a minute. The weights belonging to the clock work descend inside of the central iron column."

As planned, the new light was exhibited on November 1, 1858. On November 4, Engineer Morton wrote to Capt. Franklin, *"The light was duly exhibited on the first instant and burned excellently. I hope to carry with me to Washington a photograph of the establishment in a week or so."* (Unfortunately, this photograph cannot be found.)



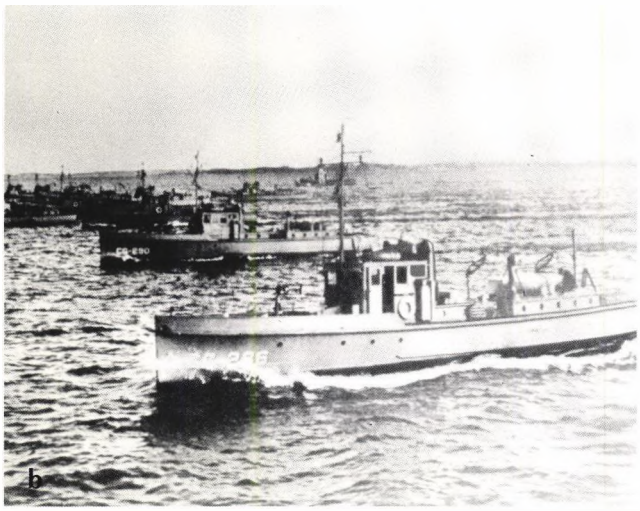


Looking eastward from the Fire Island Light Tower. Note the fresnel lamp on the left, part of the beacon.



Details of oldtime lighting systems.

a



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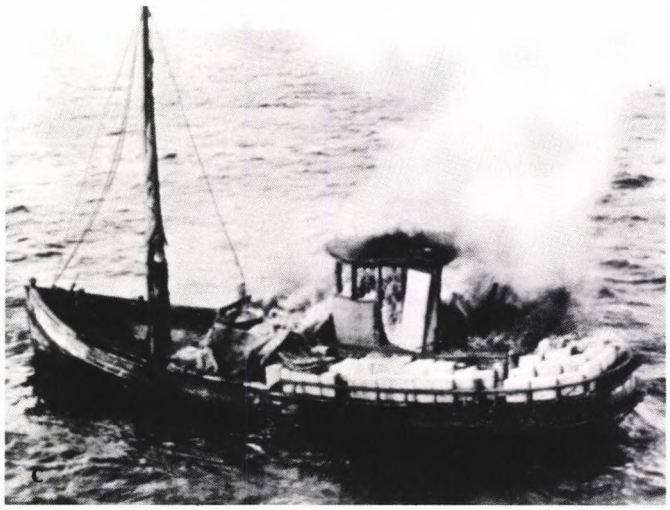

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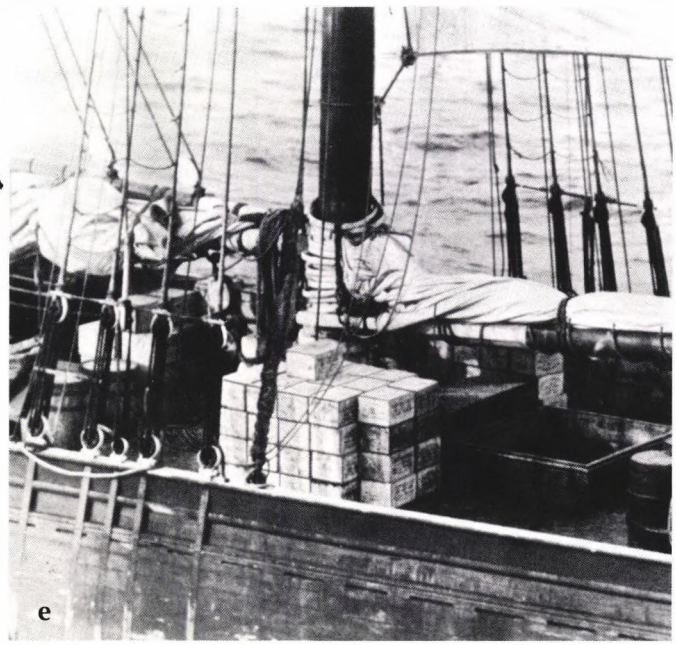


e

a. - A rumrunner, Mary Langdon, is flanked by Coast Guard vessels *Redwing* (l.) and CG-237 (r.) after her seizure.
b. - 75 foot Coast Guard Patrol boats.
c. - Rumrunner *Lynwood* was set afire by the crew to destroy evidence before seizure.
d. - Rumrunner *Mistinguette,* lying outside the 12-mile limit, is picketed by Coast Guard vessel, *Terry.* Small craft from Long Island harbors often tried to slip by the Coast Guard, to load up with rum.
e. - Rumrunner *Kirk and Sweeney,* with cases and barrels of rum on deck.

CHAPTER VII

THE NOBLE EXPERIMENT

If you are making the trip from Bay Shore to Fire Island these days, you are liable to board a staid and sturdy ferry called the *South Bay Courier*. On weekends, she makes the trip several times a day, carrying her load of sunworshippers to and from Fire Island. She doesn't look her age — she's perhaps 60 years old.

You should have seen her when she was young - a real hellion! In those days she was known as the Artemis, and her business was to outrun the U.S. Coast Guard. She was one of a fleet of rum-runners engaged in bringing ashore the illegal booze that awaited the daring just 21 miles* to the west - offshore the Fire Island Light.

Prohibition, the so-called noble experiment, went into effect on January 17, 1920; it marked the beginning of an era of fascinating foolishness in America. Overnight, all Americans were to stop drinking liquor! The very denial of liquor seemed to make it all the more desirable. Drinking became the *in* thing to do. The thrill was not so much in drinking the forbidden potion or getting a giddy lift from the alcohol, as it was in the delicious thrill of flouting regulations - and looking clever about it. The speakeasy was born, to cater to the thirsty. Home brew came into being, along with pocket flasks, flappers - and the organization of the underworld.

Within a short time after the Prohibition Act, illegal liquor began flowing into the United States by land and sea, and few who wanted to lift an elbow had to go without. The rum ships, loaded to the decks with contraband, sailed from Canada, the islands of the Caribbean, and ultimately directly from Europe. They lay offshore in international waters just beyond the three-mile limit, the point at which United States government jurisdiction ceased. There was busy traffic at night, as small power boats scurried out from shore, skirting the few Coast Guard boats around, and swept back to land with their cases of liquor aboard. The rum fleet stretched all up and down the East Coast, from Massachusetts to Florida. However, New York, with its nightclubs gone dry and its thirsty millions, offered the greatest financial rewards to the rum fleet lying off the Long Island shore - and to the little craft running back and forth.

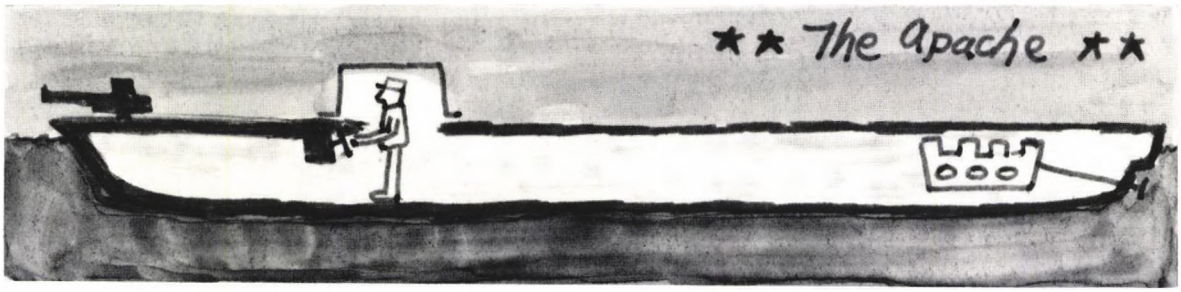
The Coast Guard could not touch the rum fleet in international waters, and they had a busy time of it with the small craft darting forth and back. Some were caught, but most of them were able to manage several trips a day, and their skippers to reap top dividends, often enough to invest in bigger and faster rum-runners.

In time, the United States government negotiated treaties with some rather reluctant European exporters of the contraband, and established a 21-mile limit. Further, the Coast Guard - now combining the Revenue Cutter Service and the former Life-Saving Service-was arming itself with larger and faster cutters to discourage the rum-running fleet. However, the rewards were too great, the nights too dark and the seas too wide-spread for the Coast Guard to be more than an inconvenience to the rum-runners.

From Canada, England and France, and other ports of Europe, the boats of the rum fleet steamed toward the United States to take their positions along Rum Row. As time went on, the Coast Guard supplemented its fleet, as the government sought to cut the odds favoring the rum runners. The Coast Guard cutters would line up within sight of the rum ships, there to play a cat-and-mouse game with the speedy little rum-runners darting out under cover of darkness to load up and get back to serve their thirsty clientele.

The rum-runners started out as independent businessmen - formerly fishermen and lobstermen who had made their living from the sea - and now had found a much better-paying cargo. As the stakes grew however, the illicit trade gave birth to organized bootlegging - the beginnings of organized crime in the United States. Soon, it was the land-based bootleggers who were bankrolling the building of larger and faster rum-runners. As the Coast Guard increased the power of its cutters, the rum-runners in turn were fitted with ever more powerful motors capable of outrunning the best the Coast Guard could offer. It became a game of cat-and-mouse - and often a deadly game - played out on local waters.

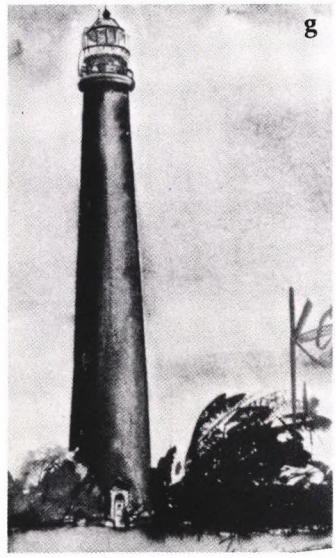
Through it all, the Fire Island Light cast its piercing beacons seaward, impersonally giving bearings to the licit and illicit, plying their way through the dark Long Island waters.



Drawing of a "Submarine" Rum Runner, from a L.I. Newspaper of the era.

*Originally three miles, the off-shore limit was later increased to 21 miles.

LONG ISLAND LIGHTHOUSES



a. Execution Rock Light
b. Orient Point Light
c. The Eaton's Neck Lighthouse
d. Montauk Light
e. Lloyd Light
f. Horton's Point Lighthouse
g. Ponquogue Light
h. OldField Light

CHAPTER VIII

THE FUTURE

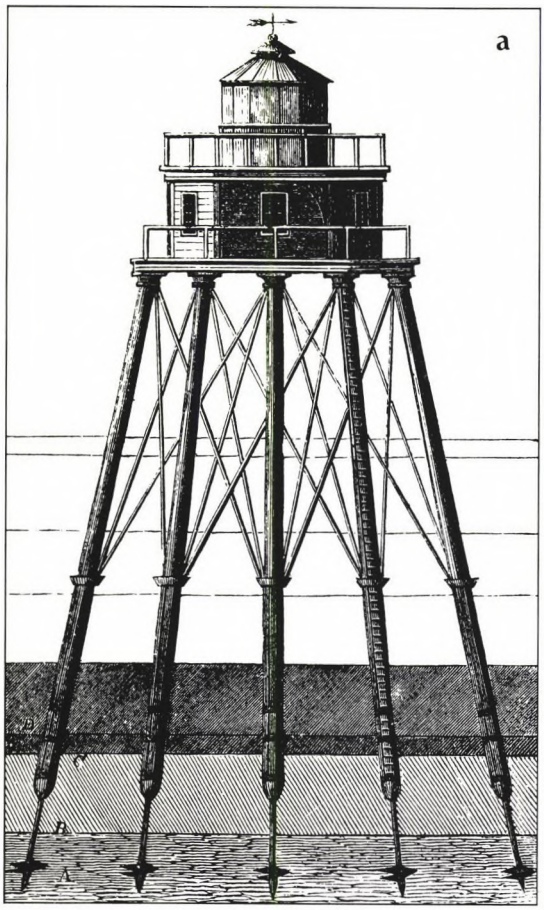
Although the Fire Island Light has been dark since 1974, the historic structure continues to cast light on another era. Its story spreads over several generations and covers times of great change in our nation's history. Its lighting arrangements alone give off the flavor of its history: whale oil, lard oil, kerosene, incandescent oil vapor and electricity!

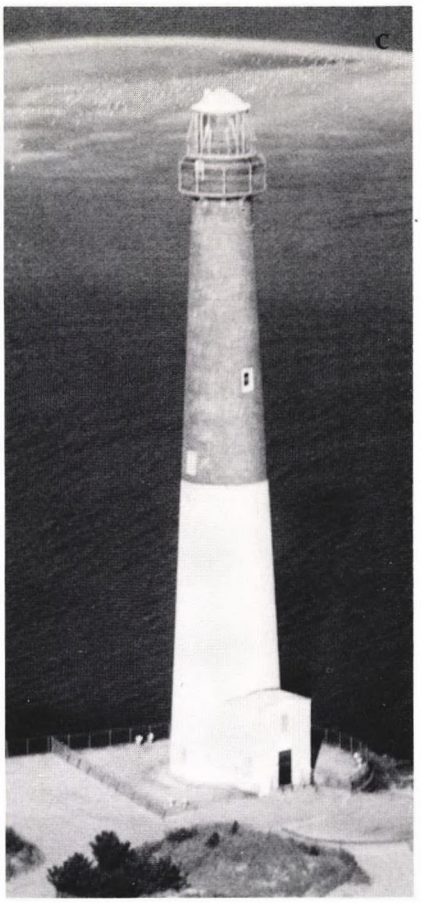
The Fire Island Light also bears silent testimony to the unremitting interacting forces of sea and land. When the Light was first built in 1826, it was located practically on the water's edge of western Fire Island. Today, the Light is some 4½ miles from the inlet - with 150 years of sand having been carried from east to west over the years.

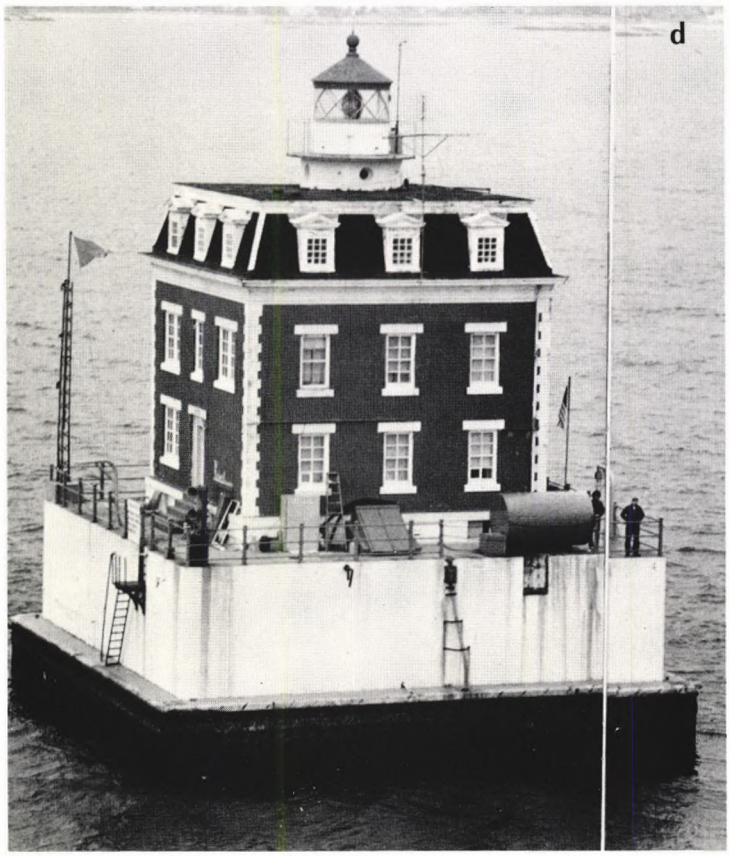
The National Park Service, which administers the Fire Island Lighthouse as part of the Fire Island National Seashore, plans to restore the Lighthouse to its original condition, and to open it to the public. The adjacent Lighthouse-Keeper's quarters will be converted to a Maritime Museum, housing memorabilia of the events and times of the Light's 148-year history. Material on the many vessels that were lost in Fire Island waters, and stories of the Fire Island Lighthouses and the Life-Saving Service will also be included. A nature trail and an environmental facility are also planned.

Although its lamps are dark, the Fire Island Lighthouse will continue to light up the detail of a time gone by - to generations yet to come.

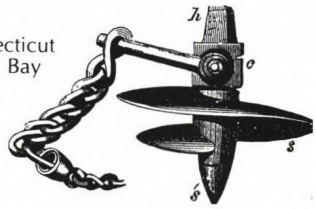
Famous Light Houses







a. Port Fleetwood England (Screw Foundation)
b. Sandy Hook Light, N.Y. Harbor
c. Barnegat Light, New Jersey
d. New London Ledge Lighthouse, Connecticut
e. Thomas Point Shoal Light, Chesapeake Bay



the story of... the FIRE ISLAND LIGHT