The quest to establish a navigational aid at the mouth of the Potomac River was an arduous one, requiring the construction of five lighthouses and the assistance of several floating lightships. The first attempt was an iron frame tower built in 1802, and in just five short years the threat of soil erosion forced it to be moved further inland. This first of many Smith Point lighthouses was constructed by Elzy Burroughs, whose tower at New Point Comfort faced similar challenges from a vanishing shoreline. After being moved, Burrough's iron structure proved ineffective as a light, and so in 1821 a lightship was stationed nearby to help mark the shoals near the river mouth.

In 1828 the Treasury Department (in charge of lighthouses at the time) was given another opportunity to build a better lighthouse, as the shoreline continued to recede and threatened the iron tower's new position. New land was purchased further inland, but the replacement tower was poorly built. By 1853 it was structurally unsound and badly cracked, and the iron frame for the lantern was dangerously weakened. The Light House Board, taking over maintenance duties from the Treasury, recognized that to put the lighthouse in proper order would require great expenditure. Given the persistent soil erosion they recommended a screwpile lighthouse, set offshore and grounded into a sandbar. Though Congress appropriated some money for this in 1855, it was not nearly enough for a project

that was more expensive (though also more enduring) than an inland light.

The Light House Board made the most of the situation, and installed a fourth order Fresnel lens in the precariously placed tower to replace the old arrangement of fifteen oil lamps and reflectors. The lighthouse inspector put the ruined tower, lantern and keeper's house into a state of temporary repair, but he ominously noted that "the bank on which the tower stands is fast washing away..."

In 1857 the problem of illumination was solved with the arrival of a brand new lightship, containing the best and most up to date apparatus available. The Board enthusiastically noted that the new ship could both mark the position of Smith's Point Shoal, as well as indicating the entrance to the Potomac River. The Board was also mindful of expensive repairs to the inland tower, as the ebb and flow of the tides was wearing away its foundation. They decided to discontinue the lighthouse, and in 1859 it was removed and the premises were rented out. The lightship continued to illumine the area for two more years, until it was sunk by Confederate guerillas in the Civil War. Another lightship promptly replaced it, and this one remained in service until 1868, when the screwpile lighthouse was finally paid for and constructed.

For the next twenty five years the screwpile structure was

a success. It originally emitted a fixed white light signal, which was soon changed to a revolving white. In 1892 the fog signal was transferred to a specially constructed portion of the roof, to enhance its audibility. The station was also equipped with boat hoisters and thoroughly repaired.

Having made these improvements, the Board would soon lose this structure to the treacherous ice floes which plagued lighthouses of similar design. In 1893 the first ice damage occurred, and the frightened keepers abandoned the station and were later fired. The lighthouse was fixed, but just two years later a more powerful ice floe wrenched the structure from its foundation and carried it away. Given the importance of the beacon, Congress immediately appropriated $25,000 to replace it, and gave the Board permission to engage up to 80,000 additional dollars in construction contracts.

Unsurprisingly, it was decided to employ a massive and sturdy caisson foundation, which could resist the worst of the ice. Construction began in Baltimore in 1896, and in April of the next year it was towed out to the offshore site. Workers filled the caisson with concrete and let it sink into the shoal, ultimately piling over 700 tons of rip rap stone around the base. Pneumatic machinery was brought in to dig the caisson down to a depth of 15 feet, 5 inches. Penetrating the last three feet of sand on the shoal, workers were troubled by the

release of sulphurated hydrogen gas, which was highly irritating to the eyes and delayed the work for some time.

The Smith Point caisson lighthouse stands in 24 feet of water and is 52 feet tall. Its light originally flashed white every thirty seconds, with a red sector denoting the nearby shoals. The illumination and fog bell apparatus from the destroyed screwpile structure had been recovered by divers, and these were installed in the new light. The Fresnel lens was 20 inches in diameter, with six panels each containing a bulls eye. The keeper’s dwelling is octagonal and was painted white; the caisson was painted brown and the lantern black. The station was built to the same specifications as Wolf Trap light, and both were intended to resemble the average family dwelling of the mid 1800's.

A 1936 inspection report noted that the station contained both a standby bell and striker, along with the diaphonic fog signal. The fog signal was powered by a compressor which took ten minutes to start, and the manual bell was used while it powered up. By this time modern radio equipment had also been installed at the lighthouse. The station contained three boats for the use of the keepers, including a 22 foot skiff and a 22 foot motorboat. The keepers could pilot these to the nearby community of Sunnybank, four and a half miles up the Little Wicomico River.

In 1971 the light was switched to unmanned operation, and a submarine power cable was run three miles from a nearby plant. If this power source is interrupted, a 2 volt battery backup system is activated, which provides enough energy for a small emergency light on the outside of the lantern room. This back-up serves in tandem with an automatic monitoring system connected to the Coast Guard’s Hampton Roads engineering department in Portsmouth.

In the 1980's the submarine cables were in fact damaged and needed replacement, and the Coast Guard considered decommissioning the lighthouse. Public outcry was abrupt and determined however, proving that citizens do indeed become attached to their historic landmarks. In 1988 the power cables were replaced and the lighthouse lived on as an active aid to navigation.

In 1991 the lighthouse tender *Gentian* landed at the site, along with a barge containing a crane and manlift. The repair crew power washed the lighthouse from water line to lantern room, scraped and repainted both inside and out and repaired cracks in the mortar work. The roof was sealed, the balustrade sandblasted and painted, and the windows replaced with vented acrylic panels.

A visitor to the lighthouse today would find two large rooms on the entrance level, containing the electronic equipment

and the emergency battery power packs. The second floor contains three irregularly shaped rooms with tongue and groove wood floors. One of the rooms is five sided and also has a pentagonal closet. Ascending to the third floor, one would find an 8 by 10 foot watch room containing a metal ladder which leads up into the lantern room. This last is a six foot wide octagonal space enclosed in glass. The white light flashes every 15 seconds from a thousand watt bulb, and is accompanied by a fog signal which bellows every 30 seconds.

In 2005 Smith Point became the first off shore lighthouse to be auctioned off to a private party. Bidding at an online auction for government property, David McNally out dueled two other participants to obtain the lighthouse for $170,000. His acquisition includes only the octagonal dwelling and lantern room; it does not apply to the caisson beneath. The Coast Guard still maintains stewardship over the beacon, and McNally is required to preserve access to it. This is the start of a new trend for the nation’s lighthouses; these automated and keeper-less bastions are becoming available for private ownership and even residence. The Coast Guard has long been mindful of the cost of maintaining these structures, and historical preservation groups have not found the burden any easier. Some enterprising owners have even taken to renting out their premises to lighthouse enthusiasts, who can spend the night and

experience the life of the extinct keeper, watching the lantern turn amidst the foamy seas.

Resources

“Smith Point.” Bay Beacons. Pp. 92-95.

Zaccaria, Anthony and Jessie. “Smith Point Lighthouse.” Pp. 33.