

In 1819 the Secretary of the Treasury, in charge of the young nation's lighthouses, was presented with a difficult decision. Congress had appropriated some money for navigational aids in the Chesapeake, but there was only enough available to illuminate one of two vital areas of need. The choice was between "Windmill Point, at the south of the Rappahannock River, or a light vessel or boat on Wolf Trap Shoals..." The Secretary chose the Wolf Trap site as the more immediately pressing.

Perhaps the Secretary had in mind the misfortune of the *Wolfe*, a 350-ton Royal British Navy ship "enlisted...to curtail piracy and smuggling, and 'to enforce the detested Navigation Acts.'" In 1691 this vessel had "run aground on the shoal to which she was reluctantly to bestow her name." The ship's captain immediately summoned help, and watermen of the Virginia colony made haste to unload the heavy guns, ammunition and stores weighing down the ship. Then they pumped out the seawater which had leaked through the hull, and towed her to safety. The Captain was grateful for the help, but nevertheless he refused to compensate the watermen for their efforts. The Colonial Governor held the Captain liable and ordered the garnishment of his wages. Ultimately the ship's owners settled the Captain's debts, but the affair so angered the watermen that they thereafter referred to the shoal as Wolf Trap.

With its troublesome history to seafaring vessels, the

shoal won out over Windmill Point and in 1821 received a brand new 180-ton light vessel. This ship carried two fixed lights, at elevations of 30 and 38 feet, which were visible for ten miles. The ship was painted a lead-gray color and augmented with a fog bell. For the next 40 years it served to warn vessels navigating the Chesapeake of its shallow sands, until it was sunk in the Civil War.

The Light House Board had found fault with the ship before its destruction, however. Having taken over lighthouse duties from the Treasury Department in the mid 1800's, the Board took measures to refurbish many of the deteriorating lightships in the Chesapeake. In August of 1854 the *Wolf Trap* was towed to Alexandria, Virginia, where it was repaired and "outfitted with new lanterns." After its sinking in 1861, a new light ship was stationed at the shoal three years later, when the Union had the region more firmly under control. After the war, however, the Board was intent on replacing costly light ships with screwpile lighthouses, which are "built on a foundation of wooden pilings covered with cast-iron screw sleeves." Such designs required far less maintenance and personnel than light ships. "In the spring of 1870, two schooners carried the ironwork and the clapboard hexagonal lighthouse dwelling...to the site, marked by buoys, that had been selected for Wolf Trap light. The substratum was found to be extremely firm and the Light House

Board felt confident that the lighthouse could withstand severe storms and moving ice..."

Construction of the new light mostly went off without a hitch, except when a storm blew away the workman's platform and delayed the first lighting until October 1, 1870. In service for nearly 25 years, the lighthouse contained a fourth-order Fresnel lens, fixed white, "varied by a white flash every 30 seconds. Built in 16 feet of water, the focal plane of the light was 38 feet and was visible for 11 nautical miles." A red sector was added to the light to help mark the emergence of the shoals.

In January of 1893, heavy ice floes exerted so much pressure on the screwpile foundation that the lighthouse broke off and was carried twenty miles to the south. It was found afloat a few days later, with only its roof and lantern still peaking out above the water. The lantern and a few other items were salvaged, and the keeper was able to escape the doomed structure, walking across the ice "to a nearby tugboat trapped in the frozen waters of the Chesapeake Bay."

A lightship was dispatched to the shoals for emergency duty; meanwhile the Board requested proposals for an "ironwork and wooden caisson" lighthouse. "It was determined to replace it (the screwpile light) with a structure which could withstand such attacks of ice by means of its inherent weight and

solidity." Such a structure would contain a pier with "a shell composed of 210 cast-iron plates," measuring 32 feet in diameter and 42 feet in height. This, in turn, would be "bolted to the roof of a wooden caisson...(and)filled with concrete to a level of 30 feet 2 inches above the roof of the caisson..." In total, Congress appropriated \$70,000 to build the new lighthouse.

In late December of 1893 the tides were finally high enough to allow the launching of the caisson and the empty iron cylinder of the pier, and the process of sinking the structure into the ground was begun in March of 1894. It was then filled with concrete to resist "the great pressure resulting from the moving fields of ice." The lighthouse was lit on September 20, 1894.

With a focal plane of 52 feet, the fourth order lens is visible for 11 miles out to sea. The base of the lighthouse rises twelve feet out of the water, upon which is the octagonal brick keeper's dwelling and lantern room. Embedded in the concrete section are two water cisterns holding 4,500 gallons, and above these is a cellar with rooms for the storage of oil, coal and provisions. Walls and steel beams divide these rooms, making them "reasonably fireproof," and also support the weight of the house. The dwelling contains a kitchen, living room and bathroom on its first floor; the second floor boasts three bedrooms. The third level is an eight foot square watch room,

upon which sits the lantern and deck. It is "essentially identical to the lighthouse at Smith Point."

In the late 1920's the dwelling was given a red coat of paint to protect the bricks from the corrosive "freezing salt water spray." For many years the lens was coupled with a reed trumpet fog signal to help ships navigate the shallows, but these days only a small solar powered light is used. The lighthouse also contained a radio calibration station, and for this reason Wolf Trap was one of the very last manned light stations on the Chesapeake, only being automated in 1971.

In 1919 keeper James B. Hurst and his assistant, V.J. Montague, were commended by the Light House Board for their roles in a daring sea rescue. During a severe storm the schooner *Sidonia Curley* was sunk four miles away. Shortly thereafter a man, woman and four children landed at the station in a motor boat. "In endeavoring to land the occupants of the boat...the keeper was twice washed from the steps, but each time managed to retain a hold on the steps with one hand." Ultimately the shipwreck victims were brought safely aground, with the smallest two year old child "being hoisted up in a bag."

These days there would be no keepers to come to the aid of victims similarly afflicted. The lack of human personnel has also led to the inevitable deterioration of the lighthouse, so

that when the buoy tender *Cowslip* was dispatched in 1991 to repair the light, its crew had their work cut out for them: "...They found windows broken by bullets and storms, a leaking roof and twenty years of weather damage. Working 12-hour days the crew replaced all the windows with...plexiglass, installed vents to improve air circulation (and) water-blasted and painted the exterior walls." The light, which had been placed on the peak of the cupola, was removed inward to the pedestal of the lantern. A Coast Guard officer noted that the cupola was unsafe, as personnel servicing the light "must climb up onto the top of the cupola, and are limited to only one square foot of area in which to stand...after arranging themselves in this precarious position they then must lean out and tend to the task of servicing not one but two 300 mm lanterns..."

The *Cowslip's* Chief Boatswain Mate was optimistic about the future of the station: "This is a strong and sturdy lighthouse and I really think (it will) last another 150 years." Today it remains a familiar day mark and nighttime aid to navigation, faithfully demarcating the position of the treacherous shoals.

#### Resources

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