



Calvert Marine Museum photo

# Why Preserve Lighthouses?

**Figure 1.** Drum Point Lighthouse at Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons, Maryland.

## What is a Lighthouse?

There is no standard definition of a “lighthouse.” Webster’s dictionary defines a lighthouse as “a tower or other lofty structure with a powerful light at the top, erected at some place important or dangerous to navigation to serve as a guide or warning to ships at night.”<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, author of the first modern dictionary in the English language, in 1755, defined a lighthouse as “a high building at the top of which lights are hung to guide ships at sea.” Lighthouses, however, are not restricted to guiding ships at sea, but are located on any body of water where vessels are assisted by their presence. The U.S. Lighthouse Service in

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<sup>1</sup> The character of the light could be fixed or revolving a various speeds to create timed flashes to distinguish it from nearby lights. Tall towers were often painted with different colors and patterns called “daymarks” so they could be identified during daylight hours.

1915 regarded lighthouses as “lights where resident keepers were employed.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, under this last definition, very few lights would be classified as lighthouses: all but one are automated and do not require keepers. A lighted buoy, while an aid to navigation, is not considered a lighthouse, whereas all lighthouses serve or once served as aids to navigation. The U.S. Coast Guard maintains about 50,000 aids to navigation but less than 500 lighthouses (the official Coast Guard count as of July

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<sup>2</sup> Robert de Gast, *The Lighthouses of The Chesapeake* (Baltimore, Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. viii; *United States Lighthouse Service 1915* (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1916), p. 18; and *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Second Edition* (New York, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 1047. There are instances of lighthouses which were built for land travel. The Atacoma Desert town of Pica, Chile, had a lighthouse to guide travelers at night to their springs.

1992 was 481;<sup>3</sup> the Initiative's light station database reported 425 Coast Guard-owned light stations in September 1996).

"Lighthouse" and "light" are often used synonymously, but in fact have distinct meanings. Lighthouses are structures or towers which were built in strategic locations to contain and elevate lights. Lights are the aid-to-navigation signals which mariners use for navigation. "Light station" refers not only to the lighthouse but to all the buildings at the installation supporting the lighthouse including keeper's quarters, oil house, fog signal building, cisterns, boathouse, workshop, etc.

Counting the number of lighthouses in the United States depends not only on the definition used, but also whether one station has more than one light tower. For example, Three Sisters Lights, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, consists of three separate towers. Cape Henry Light Station, Virginia, consists of an inactive older tower and a newer operational tower. The Cape Charles Lighthouse, Virginia, consisted of three towers built in different locations at different times; the first tower is now completely washed away, the second tower is in ruins in the surf, and the third tower is still operational. The National Park Service's *1994 Inventory of Historic Light Stations* contains 611 existing historic light stations encompassing 631 existing historic light towers. An appendix includes 190 sites or ruins in a preliminary listing of former stations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "United States Coast Guard Lighthouse Policy Review" (enclosure 7 to Chapter 6 of COMDTINST M11011.9B dated July 27, 1992), p. 1; copy in files of National Maritime Initiative, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup> Candace Clifford, *1994 Inventory of Historic Light Stations* (Washington, D.C., National Park Service, 1994), p. ix and xviii; and James Delgado and Kevin Foster, "Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Historic Aids to Navigation," *National Register Bulletin*

## Lighthouses and Our National Heritage

*Nothing indicates the liberality, prosperity or intelligence of a nation more clearly than the facilities which it affords for the safe approach of the mariner to its shores.*

—*Report of the Lighthouse Board, 1868*

Lighthouses have been a part of our nation from its inception. In 1789, after adopting the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the First Congress of the United States created the Lighthouse Establishment (in the ninth law passed) to take over the operation of the 12 colonial lighthouses, (including Boston Harbor Lighthouse built in 1716, the first lighthouse established in what today is the United States), as well as to oversee the construction and operation of new lighthouses. The first public works project in the United States was the building of Cape Henry Lighthouse, lighted in 1792. President George Washington took a personal interest in the Cape Henry Lighthouse, approving the construction contracts and the appointment of its first keeper. Similarly, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson attended to similar lighthouse duties during their presidencies. The First Congress placed responsibility for aids to navigation within the Treasury Department, where Alexander Hamilton personally administered them for several years. The high level of attention given to lighthouses by the newly created nation was tied directly to its need for commerce and its desire to compete with other world powers. Lighthouses helped to instill confidence in ship captains as well as

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#34 (Washington, D.C., National Park Service, Interagency Resources Division), p. 2. The number of light station sites in the Initiative's lighthouse database had grown to 282 at the time of publication.



Isle Royale NP photo

**Figure 2.** Rock Harbor Light Station on Isle Royale, Michigan, is one of 409 light stations listed in the National Register of Historic Places up through 1996.

foreign governments, symbolically implying that the United States was a responsible world power worthy of due recognition. Today the United States has the largest number of lighthouses as well as the most architecturally diverse, of any country in the world.<sup>5</sup>

By preserving light stations, we preserve for everyone a symbol of that chapter in American history when maritime traffic was the lifeblood of the nation, tying isolated coastal towns and headlands through trade to distant ports of the world.<sup>6</sup> Historic and cultural resources represent our nation's patrimony. The federal government has been turning over many lighthouses by lease, license, or sale to federally recognized non-profit organizations whose mission, at least in part, is to preserve the lighthouse. As stewards for their

lighthouses, these organizations have certain responsibilities for proper maintenance and preservation and are expected to carry out these duties for the benefit of citizens both at local and national levels. The continued use and appreciation of these historic light stations is not merely in the interest of historic preservation groups but of the public at large. Each lighthouse is unique in the context of its geographic location, architectural style, and history. Even lighthouses which were sold by the government into private hands will benefit by good stewardship if for no other reason than to maintain their resale value. Where the historic integrity of the light station remains intact, the visitor can experience an important aspect of our maritime heritage.

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Davis, "Keeping the Light: A Handbook for Adaptive Re-use of Island Lighthouse Stations" (Rockland, Maine, Island Institute, 1987), p. 2.

## What Makes a Lighthouse “Historic?”

The National Register of Historic Places is considered the “official list of the Nation’s cultural resources worthy of preservation.” Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act, the National Register is maintained by the Department of Interior’s National Park Service. It is currently a listing of over 60,000 properties that have been nominated and accepted as having historic, architectural, archeological, engineering, or cultural significance, at the national, state, or local level. The nominations are maintained both on paper and in a computerized database. Nearly 70 percent of all lighthouses in the United States over 50 years old are either listed in the National Register or are determined eligible for listing, and the number is climbing as additional lighthouses are added to the list.

### Identifying Historic Properties

Not all light stations are necessarily historic nor do all warrant preservation. But how does one determine historic significance of light station properties? How can one be certain that a light station or portion of a light station (only one or more structures of a light station versus the entire light station) warrant preservation? Perhaps the best method for determination is using the criteria established by the federal government for inclusion of historic properties in the National Register of Historic Places.

These criteria include:

- significance of a property in American history
- significance of a property in American architecture
- significance of a property in American archeology
- significance of a property in American engineering



**Figure 3.** Sandy Hook Light Station, Highlands, New Jersey, is the oldest operating lighthouse in the U.S., making it significant for its role in American history.

- significance of a property in American culture

The National Register nomination process uses the following criteria to determine the historic significance of sites, buildings, structures, and objects:

- a) association with *events* that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of our history; or
- b) association with the lives of *persons* significant in our past; or
- c) embody the *distinctive characteristics* of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- d) have yielded, or may be likely to yield, *information* important in prehistory or history.

Besides meeting one or more of the National Register criteria, a property

generally must also be at least 50 years old (exceptions are possible), and have integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association in order to be eligible for inclusion in the National Register. This means, in effect, that if a property has been seriously compromised by unsympathetic alterations, it may not be eligible for the National Register. Your State Historic Preservation Officer (see Part VI., **Resources** for listing) can assist you in determining whether your property is historically significant and whether or not it may qualify for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Examples of light stations which meet one or more of the National Register criteria:

- Cape Henry (first tower) Lighthouse, Virginia, first lighthouse built by United States Government and first public works project is significant for its role in American history.
- Thomas Point Shoals Light Station, Maryland, built in 1875, is the last largely unaltered spider-foundation cottage-type screwpile lighthouse in the United States. As such, it is significant for American architecture and engineering.
- Minots Ledge Light Station, Massachusetts, built in 1860, was the first, and most exposed wave-swept lighthouse built in the United States and is considered one of the top ten engineering feats of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. It is also significant for American engineering.
- Sandy Hook Lighthouse, New Jersey, built in 1764, is oldest extant lighthouse in United States. As such, it is a significant property in American history.
- Pooles Island Light Station fog-signal building, Maryland, built in 1825, now demolished with its foundation ruins eroding from the banks of the island, was the site of one of the earliest mechanized fog signal stations in the United States. It is a significant property in American archeology.

## Benefits of Listing in the National Register of Historic Places

A federally owned lighthouse or any associated structures such as keeper's quarters, fog signal building, oil house, etc., which are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, cannot be altered, neglected, or demolished without the federal agency going through the Section 106 process discussed later in this section.

For profit-making organizations, certain tax credits are available to the owner for restoration costs. For non-profit historical societies and preservation groups, listing on the National Register can provide the following benefits;

- distinguishing the property as having historical significance recognized by the United States Government;
- providing leverage for assisting the owner in raising preservation and maintenance funds directly related to the lighthouse and light station associated buildings; and
- making the project eligible for matching federal historic preservation funds passed through each state. These funds are made available through a competitive grant application process and have certain conditions. Check with your State Historic Preservation Office for more information (see Part VI for listing of SHPOs).

Federal agencies, through compliance with federal historic preservation requirements, play a leadership role in preserving our nation's light stations. Most light stations are still under federal control, whether through the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, or Department of Defense.

## Federal Agency Responsibilities: The *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966*

In order to preserve our nation's heritage, a number of laws have been passed at the federal, state, and local levels to ensure that historic resources are recognized and taken into consideration during any public planning effort. While federal preservation laws date to 1906, the most prominent federal cultural resource law, from which most of the current laws, regulations, and guidelines stem, is the *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended*.

**Section 106** of the *National Historic Preservation Act* (NHPA) requires a federal agency head with jurisdiction over a federal, federally assisted, or federally licensed undertaking, to take into account the effects of the agency's undertakings on *all* properties included in or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places and, before approval of an undertaking, to afford the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP or Advisory Council) a reasonable opportunity to comment on the undertaking.

**Section 110:** The intent of Section 110 is to ensure that historic preservation is fully integrated into the ongoing programs, review of agency procedures, and missions of federal agencies. The more important and appropriate portions of Section 110 which may apply to lighthouses are summarized below:

**Section 110(a)(1)** requires that before acquiring, constructing, or leasing buildings for purposes of carrying out agency responsibilities, all federal agencies will use, to the maximum extent feasible, historic properties available to the agency. This requires agencies to give priority to

the use not only of historic properties that they own or control, but to any such properties that are available to the agency. Available historic properties might include those available for lease, purchase, or exchange. This section also designated the *Secretary of Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation* as the specific professional standards to be followed. Section 110 and the Secretary's Standards also refer to the more specific standards, *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings* (1992).

**Section 110(b)** requires each federal agency to "initiate measures to assure that where, as a result of federal action or assistance . . . an historic property is to be substantially altered or demolished, timely steps are taken to make or have made appropriate records, and that such records then be deposited . . . in the Library of Congress or with some other appropriate agency as may be designated by the Secretary [of the Interior], for future use and reference."

Section 110 Guidelines (53 FR 4727-46) state that "agencies should determine whether recordation is needed, and if so, the appropriate level and kind of recordation necessary, . . . in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), Advisory Council, and other concerned parties under 36 CFR Part 800 . . . The level and kind of documentation required . . . vary depending on the nature of the property, its relative significance . . . and the nature of the undertaking's effects."

These requirements put the obligations of compliance on the federal agencies, not the SHPO, the Advisory Council, or anyone else. To meet the regulations of the National Historic Preservation Act, a federal agency should:

- Minimize the risk of foreclosure by initiating Section 106 review as early as possible in the planning process.
- *Always* get Section 106 done before a final decision is made about whether to proceed with the project, before funds are spent on things such as advanced design, or purchase of materials, and if possible before those involved become fixed on a single preferred alternative.
- When working on the annual budget, it is important to think about compliance needs and advise supervisors on these budget matters. Although NHPA does not provide appropriation, Section 110(g) authorizes expenditure of project and program funds to support preservation work, such as compliance with Section 106 and doing work called for in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). It is necessary to meet compliance requirements through the normal budget process. Thinking of compliance needs while putting together installation's budgets can avoid funding delays later.
- Consider effects not only on properties already included on the National Register, but *also eligible properties*. It is the responsibility of the federal agency to ensure that eligible properties are identified, evaluated, and considered. These determinations of eligibility are made solely on historical, architectural, or cultural significance of a property, not management or mission requirements.

Failure to comply with preservation law may result in litigation or stop-work orders which delay completion of projects and escalate project costs.

Other federal laws which may affect lighthouse preservation and management include:

- *Antiquities Act*, 16 U.S.C. §§ 431-433
- *Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act*, 16 U.S.C. §§ 469-469c
- *Architectural Barriers Act*, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4151-4157
- *Historic Sites Act*, 16 U.S.C. §§ 461-467
- *National Environmental Policy Act*, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-4370c
- *National Historic Preservation Act*, 16 U.S.C. §§ 470-470w-6

- *Executive Order No. 11593*, Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment, 36 Fed. Reg. 8921 (1971), reprinted in 16 U.S.C. § 470 note

A summary of these laws is found in Part VI., **Resources**. Commanding officers and other personnel who deal or may deal with cultural resource management are responsible for knowing the laws and complying with these requirements. The best guide to these laws is *Introduction to Federal Projects and Historic Preservation Law* prepared by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the General Services Administration Interagency Training Center. It is full of case studies and explains how these laws and regulations affect operations. A copy of this manual can be obtained from either agency. It is highly recommended as a useful shelf tool. *Federal Historic Preservation Laws* (1993), published by the National Park Service, Cultural Resources Programs, is another useful guide to these laws.