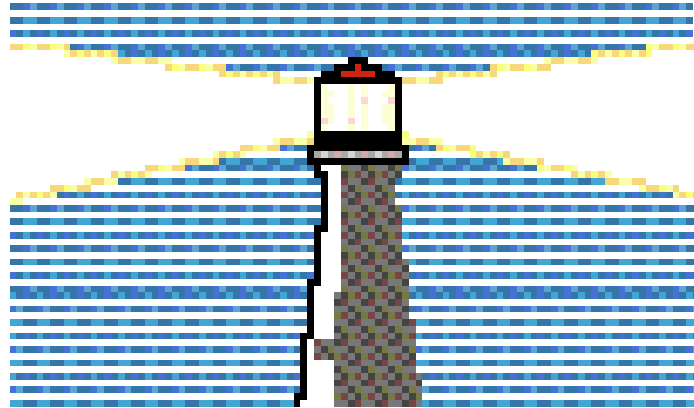


[From Summer 1997]

Cape Charles Lighthouse

Lighthouses are one of the oldest navigational aides used by ships. In the early days, lighthouses were illuminated by fires. But, as time and technology advanced, this primitive method was improved upon. Eventually, lighthouses were lit with a Xenon flash tube. Today, the flash tube is encased by a lens, which more often than not is a "Fresnel."



One of the most important lighthouses in this area is the Cape Charles light which sits on Smith island and marks the northern shore of the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The first of three Cape Charles lighthouses was built in 1827. However, it was always considered too short to be seen by offshore vessels. In 1856, \$35,000 was allocated for a new lighthouse. A new site was selected and construction began in 1857. The 150-foot tower was still under construction near New Inlet on the northeast end of Smith Island, when the Civil War broke out in 1861. Rebels removed the illuminating apparatus in April of that year and plundered most of the materials needed to complete the tower, which was finally lighted in 1864.

Unfortunately, by 1885 the sea had come within 124 feet of the keeper's dwelling and 225 feet of the tower. A jetty was built in 1886, but it was consumed by the sea. The Lighthouse Board suggested more jetties. Finally in 1890, \$150,000 was appropriated for a new lighthouse.

In 1891, while building jetties to protect the old tower until the new one was finished, work was slowed by mosquitoes which were, "so numerous and troublesome as to practically cause a suspension of operations." Contractors also faced other hostile facets of the environment. The wharf built for landing materials was washed away three times during heavy storms, and one vessel chartered to carry stone was wrecked and another badly damaged.

In June 1892, a red band, 25 feet wide, was painted around the old tower, about 60 feet above its base, so that mariners could easily distinguish the tower from other coastal lighthouses. Plans called for the new tower to be erected three-quarters of a mile inland from the second Cape Charles Lighthouse. Title to a ten-acre tract of land was secured through condemnation, and a temporary wharf and tramway was designed for landing materials. When completed, the tower - built of iron cylinders supported by a spider web frame of ironwork -- was 192 feet, seven inches in height, including the lantern.

The light of the first-order Fresnel lens was first shone on August 15, 1895. The lens, about 12 feet high and six feet in diameter, represented the first adoption of the Mahan system in a first-order light. It flashed nine times during its 30-second revolution. The flashes in the new light, however, were too quick to be distinct, so the intervals between the flashes were lengthened. In July 1963, the light was automated. To power the light, solar panels were added in 1996. It is still maintained as a navigational aid. The main dwelling remains in good shape and was used for a while by a hunting club. Then in 1996 the Nature Conservancy purchased the dwelling, which has been boarded up.

For the moment, it appears as if three is a charm. If you would like to view the lighthouse, the best view from the southern end of the peninsula is at the end of Magotha Road. Magotha Road is three miles north of the refuge on Route 600.

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