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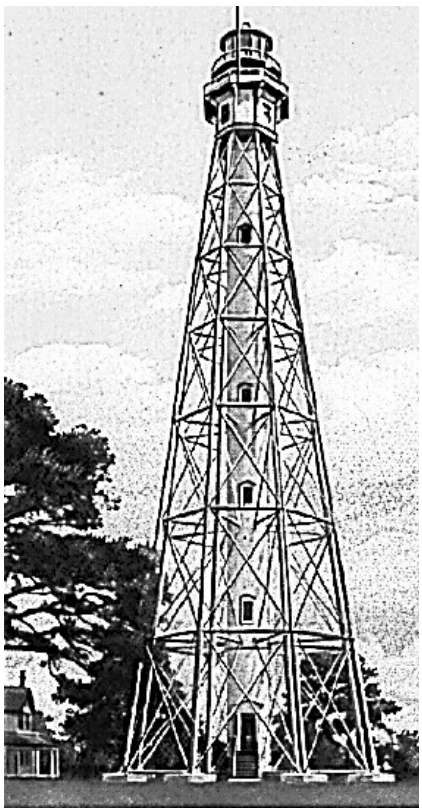
Cape Charles Light -A Brief History



Driving along the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel one may glimpse the high white tower of a lighthouse off the eastern side of the road. This structure is actually the last of a series of lighthouses to be constructed on Smith Island -- just off shore from the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula -- and is over 100 years old. The history of lighthouses on Smith Island provides an apt summary of the history of people's interactions with the barrier islands all along the Eastern Shore.

The first of the three Cape Charles Lighthouses was built on Smith Island in 1827, just off the eastern shore of Cape Charles. The purpose of the light was to mark the northern shore of the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. However, the light was constructed during grim days for United States lighthouses. Cost cutting bureaucrats in Washington had undermined lighthouse construction and design. Many lights across the country were too dim, built of poor materials, or even in the wrong place. The first Cape Charles light was too short and could only be seen 12 miles off-shore. In response to the terrible conditions of American lighthouses, a Lighthouse Board was formed in the 1850s. The board consisted of knowledgeable individuals who were responsible for the maintenance and inspection of lighthouses across the country. The formation of the board heralded the golden age in American lighthouses (the Assateague lighthouse was restored to its current condition during this era).

Thirty-five thousand dollars was allocated for a new Cape Charles Lighthouse in 1856 and construction began the next year on the northeast end of Smith Island. The lighthouse was still under construction when the Civil War broke out, and in August, 1862 Confederates raided the station. They destroyed

the light and stole many of the construction materials for the second tower. Only after the Union regained control of the peninsula was construction resumed on the second light. When completed in 1864, the light stood 600 feet from the shore. But the barrier islands are capricious and unpredictable. Erosion of the shore line immediately became a problem. By 1883 the water line was 300 feet closer to the lighthouse and was still eroding at a rate of thirty feet a year.

The Lighthouse Board began funding a series of jetties designed to stop the erosion. But, storms continually undid the work, washing away huge boulders that had taken workers days to place. At one point water was within 60 feet of the tower and, during a particularly high tide, completely surrounded the structure.

In 1894 the Board appropriated $150,000 to build a third lighthouse on Smith Island. Yet it was still necessary to place jetties off the island to protect the existing light during the construction of the new structure. Unpredictable weather plagued the operation. The wharf for landing supplies was washed away three times and one of the transport ships wrecked. Eventually the board had to spend nearly $50,000 on erosion control, one-third the cost of the new light.

The third lighthouse was completed in 1895, and stands 192 feet, 7 inches tall, the second tallest on the eastern seaboard. It is built on pipe supports with a steel framework. The light had a first order Fresnel Lens nearly 10 feet tall and 6 feet across. Invented in France during the 1830's, Fresnel lenses utilized a series of concentric lens to magnify a single lamp and were significantly brighter than American lights of the time, which required as many as 16 different lamps.

The Cape Charles Lighthouse was a manned station until it was automated in 1963. The Fresnel lens, which (along with the machinery that moved it) weighed nearly three tons, was removed and is now on display in Newport News at the Maritime Museum. The modem rotating lamp is actually no more visible than the Fresnel lens it replaced. The light was fitted with a solar panel power system in 1996. It is still owned and maintained by the US Coast Guard and continues to serve as an aide to coastal navigation.

Numerous visitors to Eastern Shore Of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge ask how to access the Lighthouse. Unfortunately, there is no public access to the island. Smith Island is owned by the Nature Conservancy which, in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other local agencies, works to help preserve and protect the fragile system of barrier islands that lay off the Eastern Shore of Virginia. However. a good view of the lighthouse is available from the end of Mogotha Road, three miles north of the refuge off Route 600. The light can also be partially seen from the marsh overlook at the south end of the Refuge and as you cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel.

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