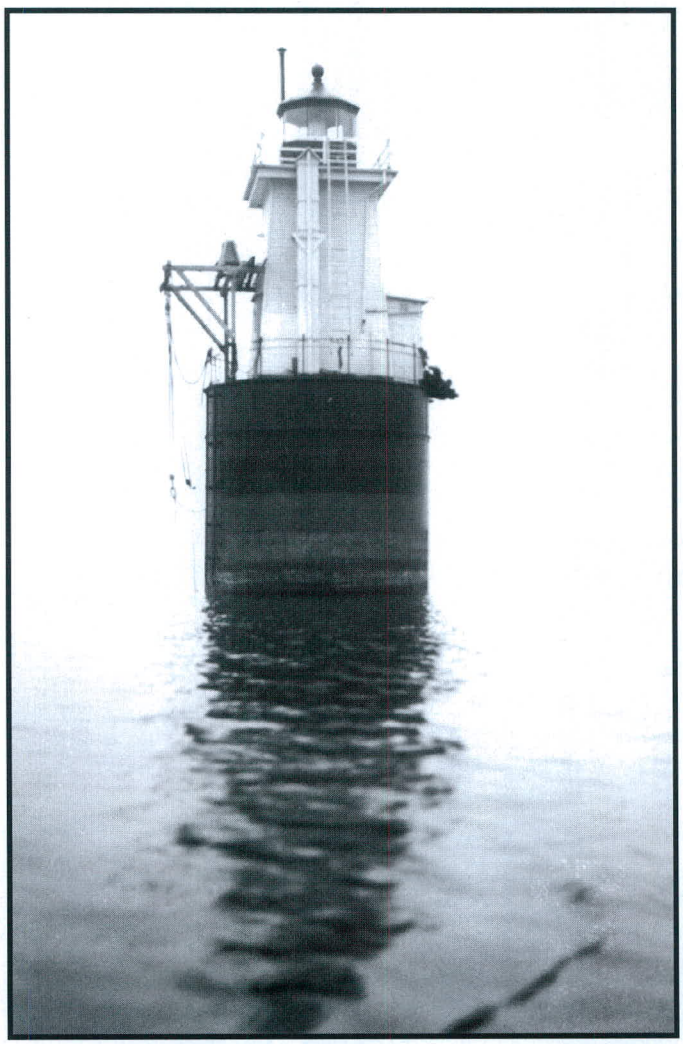
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Cold Spring Harbor Lighthouse 1890-1965

By Robert G. Bachand



Cold Spring Harbor Lighthouse 1940. Note the boat falls and bell fog signal on the left (east) side. USLHS photo.

Congress was quick to respond to the 1874 petition for establishing a lighthouse at the entrance of Cold Spring Harbor but it would be another 15 years before construction began. The appropriation, which amounted to $20,000, called for erecting either range lights or a lighthouse. The Light House Service preferred range lights since, it was reasoned, the beacons would allow mariners to more easily avoid the shallows on the west side of the harbor's entrance. By constructing two towers, the back one higher than the front, a vessel approaching the area could then line itself up on the two, and be assured that the waterway was safe for navigation. If the vessel went too far to the right, the rear range would appear to drift to the right of the front range; if it went too far to the left, the rear range would appear to drift to the left.

When first contacted, the landowners were reluctant to sell the needed parcels for the ranges; they felt that the structures might devaluate their properties. Over the next decade, no progress was made, and when the owners did finally agree to sell, their asking prices were deemed to be excessive. Thus, in 1888, the Light House Service opted instead to erect a lighthouse.

The site elected for the lighthouse was the easterly point of a shoal, some 1500 yards off Centre Island. Construction began in the late summer of 1889 with the sinking of a cast-iron caisson 5.5 feet into the sea bed. The remaining 32 feet of the cylindrical structure consisted of five courses of 16 plates each, that were held together by 1½ inch bolts. The flanges between the plates were made water-tight with twisted hemp soaked in a mixture of white and red lead and linseed oil.

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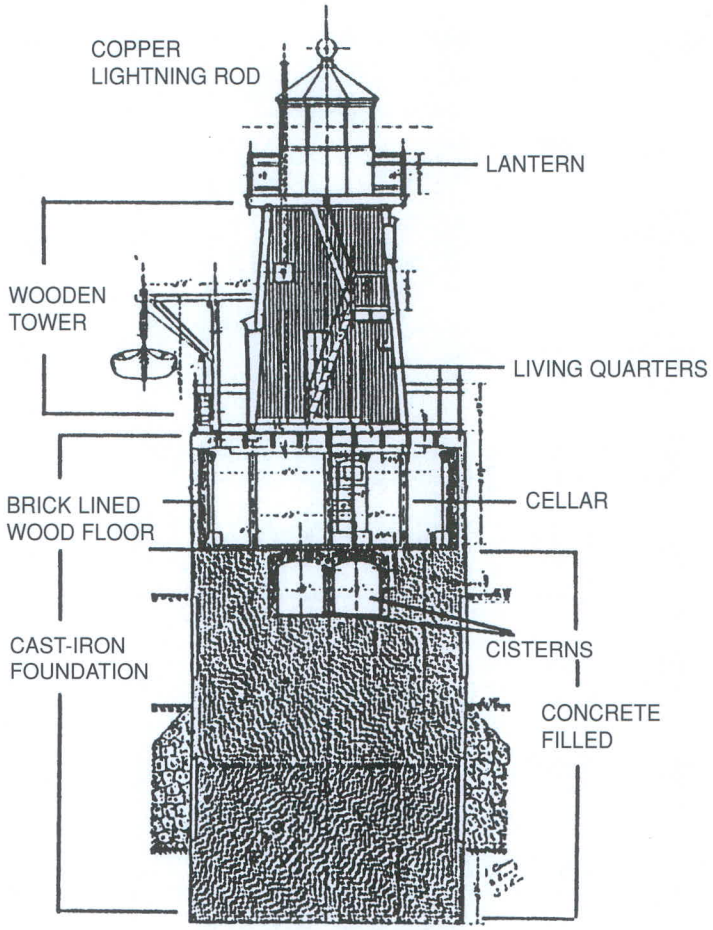
Once in place, the cylinder's sections were filled with concrete to 28 feet 4 inches in height, and within the concrete, two cisterns were built and lined with brick. A wooden floor was placed in the last section of the cast-iron cylinder and its walls were also lined with brick; the room so created served as the station's cellar. When completed, the caisson was surmounted by a square pyramidal tower that was constructed of wood. Equipped with a fourth-order Fresnel lens and a machine-operated fog bell, The station began operating on January 31, 1890.

William S. Keene, Cold Spring Harbor's first keeper, remained at the lighthouse for barely one month before resigning his post; for the next twenty-three years there was a succession of thirteen keepers. On October 19, 1913, Louis P. Brown arrived at the light station aboard the tender *Larkspur*. His tenure of eleven years was to be one of the longest for Cold Spring Harbor's keepers.

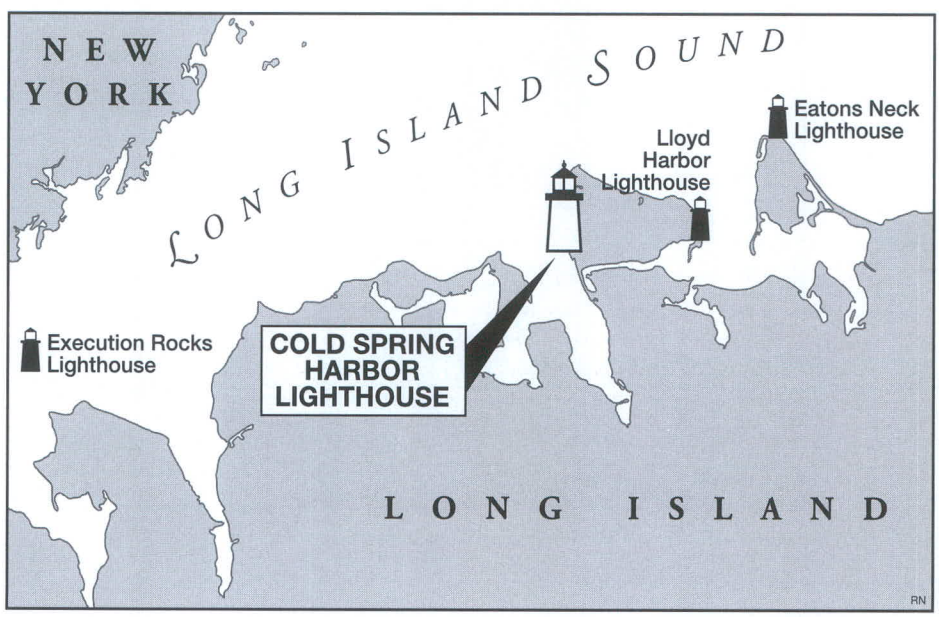
When Brown has settled in with his family at the light station, he found life there pleasant and relatively quiet. His only complaint, echoed by many of his predecessors and successors, related to rain water that leaked through the dwelling and deck, and flooded the cellar each time there was heavy precipitation. During the winter of 1918, however, he became anxious concerning the safety of his family at the lighthouse.

In early January of 1918, Cold Spring Harbor had partially frozen over and the lighthouse's cast-iron base had become surrounded by a 14-inch thick belt of ice. A sick, grinding sound permeated the structure as ice moved up and down with the changing tides. Occasionally, shifting winds drove the ice field away but it returned with a vengeance, striking the station with such force that doors were jarred open and dishes were thrown from their shelves. On at least two separate nights, vibration extinguished the station's light. Fearing that the lens might become damaged, the keeper attempted to stabilize it by stringing up a wire from the lens to hooks on the lantern's walls.

Throughout January and into February, ice fields continued to threaten the lighthouse. "This station has been under a terrible strain," wrote Keeper Brown concerning the night of February 19, 1918. A southwest wind has pushed large chunks of ice up

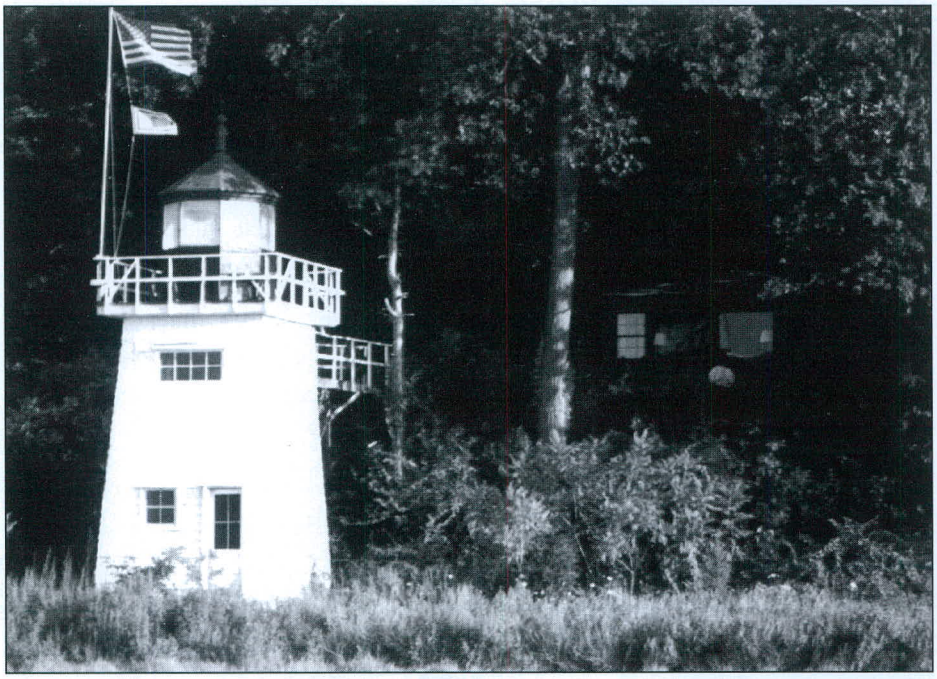


Cold Spring Harbor Light Station, sectional elevation, E.W. Light House Board, 1889.



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against the lighthouse, making it, in his words, "sway, crack, and tremble tremendously." To prevent spillage of hot embers from the stove, the keeper put out the fire and he further extinguished the station's light. "I and my family sat about all night ready to leave the station," he wrote the District Inspector of Lighthouses. Brown had expected that the structure might topple over before daylight but luckily, the wind shifted direction and the ice floe was driven ashore east of the lighthouse. A week later, a much relieved keeper entered in the lighthouse log, "ice leaving harbor." He remained on at Cold Spring Harbor until march of 1924.



The new location of the Cold Spring Harbor Lighthouse on the edge of Long Island Sound in front of the owner's house. 1990 photo by Elliot Tayman.

The winter of 1918 proved to have been cruel to other area lighthouses. At Penfield Reef (Fairfield, CT), high seas smashed in the first floor windows and flooded the kitchen and living room, as well as the engine room and cellar. At Tarrytown (NY), Greens Ledge (Norwalk, CT), and Stamford (CT), the lighthouses' cast-iron foundation plates were cracked and their protective rip-rap stones were carried away. In the spring, Cold Spring Harbor Lighthouse was found to have sustained $12,800 in damage, and the remaining stations had a total of $24,000 in losses. Winter ice, however, was a mixed blessing at Cold Spring Harbor. When the harbor froze over, the lighthouse suddenly became more accessible and visitors frequently made their way out to it.

The station was furnished with a small rowboat that was used to pick up the mail, supplies, fresh water, and to gather drift wood for the stove. For the most part, the lighthouse's usual activities appeared to have been numbingly routine, with only occasional notations in the log of visitors, changes of personnel, storms, maritime accidents and rescues. It was nevertheless well maintained by all of its keepers, and on at least two occasions, the light station received an Efficiency Star. However in July of 1934 Keeper E.J. Smith stood accused of having failed to perform his duty.

"Coldspring Harbor Lighthouse in dense fog this morning," read a telegram from Suffolk County's Assemblyman Hamilton Potter to the Light House Service. "Failed to ring bell signal and failed to respond to Oysterbay-Stamford Ferry Signals stop apparently no attendant present."

On that morning, Keeper Smith had started the clock-work operated fog bell at 7:00 am, but at 8:45 am, a kink developed in the chain and the signal stopped. Smith immediately began to work on the problem and by 9:15 am, the signal was back in operation. During that time, he heard a steamer's whistle and when he reached the tower's balcony, he saw its outline. Assuming that the vessel's officers could also see the lighthouse, he returned to work on the fog signal.

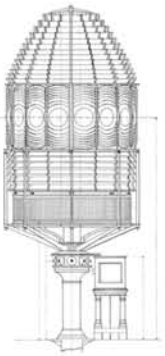
A subsequent investigation found that the keeper had not been derelict in his duty, but it was concluded that it would have been better if he had responded to the steamer's signal by ringing the bell by hand. The whistle could have, it was pointed out, come from another vessel.

Cold Spring Harbor Lighthouse continued operating until the spring of 1965, when the Coast Guard removed the wooden tower and replaced it with a skeleton tower. Mary Glenn, a resident of Centre Island, spotted the old tower floating and tethered to its former foundation; it was to be towed to Eaton's Neck where the Coast Guard planned to burn it. She had no difficulty in persuading her husband Joseph that they should save the structure. The family purchased the sentinel for the sum of $1 and floated it to shore. Using a truck's winch, the tower was then dragged across a shallow marsh to their property. The well-maintained 100-year old structure now stands nestled against a high bank on the south side of the Centre Island's tidal creek. But it wasn't too many years ago when pleasure boaters on Long Island Sound steered for Cold Spring Harbor's quaint lighthouse . . . and it seems like Only Yesterday!



The caisson of the lighthouse as it appears today. Photo courtesy of the author.

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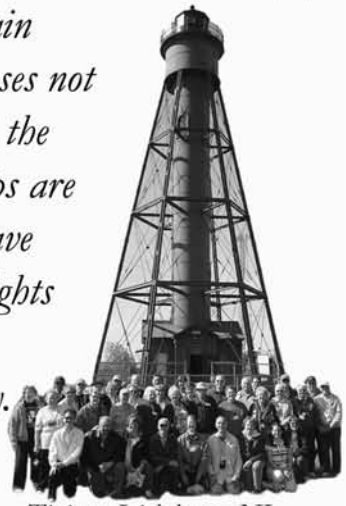
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