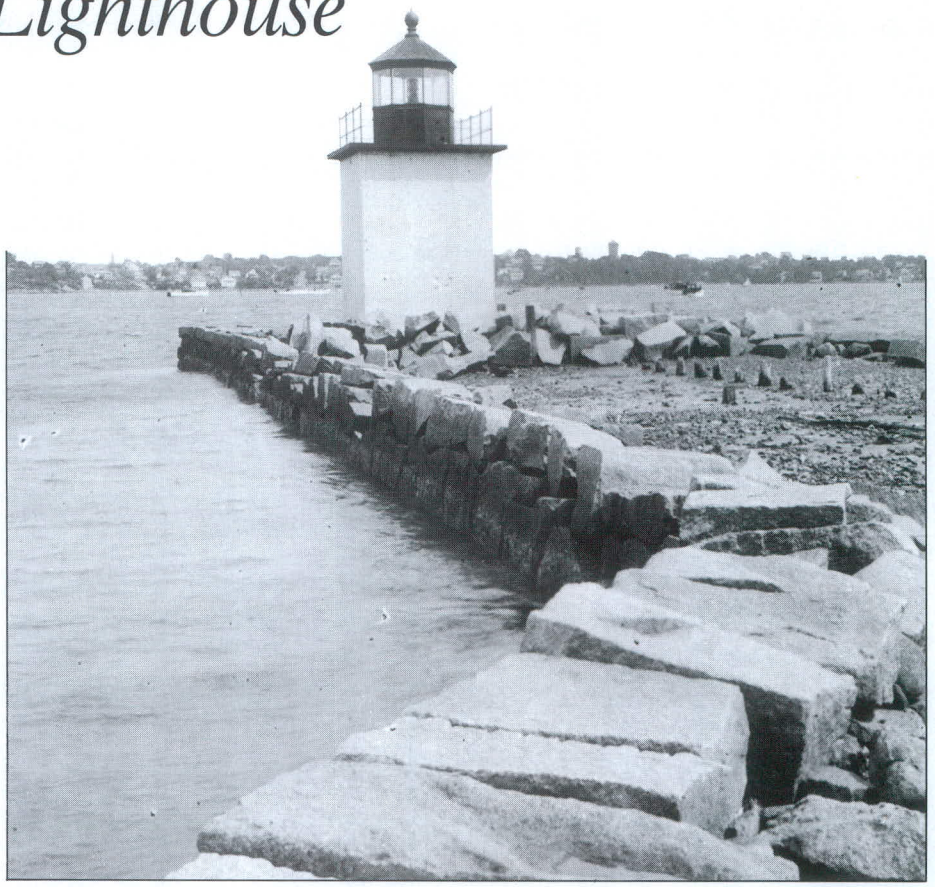
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Derby Wharf Lighthouse

by Stewart Morgan



Numerous harbors around the nation have small lighthouses which never housed a keeper nor had a dedicated keeper assigned. These small navigational aids, important to inner harbor navigation, were either assigned to the keeper of a nearby lighthouse (as an extra duty) or tended by a Lamp Lighter. In some areas the Lighthouse Establishment hired full or part time employees to tend the kerosene powered minor shore lights and lighted buoys of a harbor. The following story is of a minor lighthouse that was probably tended by a Lamp Lighter who no doubt visited the small structure every night in conjunction with his other aids to navigation duties. It is also the story of saving a small, yet important, part of our maritime heritage.

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A small lighthouse with an interesting history sits alone today at the end of Derby Wharf in Salem, Massachusetts. But thanks to Friends of Salem Maritime, working closely with the Peabody Museum of Salem, the United States Coast Guard and the National Park Service, the historic lighthouse should have more visitors in the future.

"Friends" was formed in 1983 to assist the National Park Service in preserving historic structures and grounds of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. This volunteer group has restored the Derby Wharf Lighthouse, and installed a small exhibit interpreting the structure's 115-year history.

Tourists and others who visit the site each year, especially during the summer months, are now able to learn something about the lighthouse. At the same time, the Derby Wharf Light remains operational and serves as a reminder of Salem's rich maritime past and modern mariners using the harbor.

The Derby Wharf Lighthouse was built in 1871 to guide ships safely into Salem's inner harbor along South River.

By 1797, a number of shipwrecks in the area prompted the construction of Baker's Island Light in outer Salem Harbor, four miles northeast of Derby Wharf. For many years, mariners depended upon that lighthouse to safely sail into the port of Salem.

However, other lighthouses were needed for Salem's inner bay by the mid-nineteenth century. The U.S. Government approved funds in 1870 for the construction of navigational aids in the harbor and planned one lighthouse at the end of Derby Wharf, another at Hospital Point in Beverly, and a third at Fort Pickering on Winter Island.

The appropriation was made . . . "for the establishment of three lights to mark the main channel leading to this anchorage (Salem Harbor), with the view to its becoming a harbor of refuge which may be safely entered at any time," the U.S. Lighthouse Board stated in 1870 in its annual report to Congress. The board added in its report that "The work will be commenced as soon as the titles (for Property at each of the three sites) are perfected and approved by the (United States) Attorney General in conformity to law."

Derby Wharf stretches nearly one-half mile into South River and is the longest wharf on Salem's waterfront. Two famous Salem merchants, Richard Derby and his son, Elias Hasket Derby, paid for the construction of 803 feet of the structure between 1764 and 1771. The wharf was then extended an additional 1300 feet between 1806 and 1808.

Fifteen three-storied wooden warehouses with 35 stores lined the east side of Derby Wharf during the 1800s. The buildings, leased primarily to merchants, were used as business offices and for temporary storage of ships' cargoes. Riggers, sailmakers, blacksmiths, coopers, and other artisans also leased workshops there. Ships used in coastal and foreign trade and in fishing were docked along the wharf's relatively sheltered west side.

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The wharf was inherited by Elias Hasket Derby's children after he died in 1799, and incorporated in 1810 by an act of the Massachusetts Legislature under the name of the "Derby Wharf Corporation." Sixty years passed before the wharf was selected as the site for Derby Wharf Lighthouse. At a special meeting in 1870 the corporation's stockholders voted unanimously to sell 103 square feet of land at the end of the wharf to the United States for $1,000 for the construction of the light. The purchase agreement included a right of way over the wharf to and from the lighthouse.

An oil-fueled lantern was exhibited from an old warehouse at the end of the wharf while the lighthouse was built. The temporary light was first shown on 17 January 1871.

The 12-foot-square, 25-foot-tall brick lighthouse was completed the following spring at a cost of $3,000. It was originally painted red and had an iron deck and lantern room somewhat different than the one atop the two-story tower today. The deck and lantern room, which housed the fifth-order Fresnel lens displaying a fixed-red light, was altered or replaced sometime during the late nineteenth century. The lighthouse was designed to have its unique shape, color and light signal so that mariners could distinguish it from other lighthouses, especially near Salem, by day or night. The Derby Wharf Light never required a resident keeper like other larger lighthouses in more remote areas along New England's coast.

The lighthouse was built during a period of Salem's history when her harbor could no longer compete with the deeper harbors of Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Ships entering and clearing Salem no longer engaged in trade with foreign ports to the extent that they did during the port's heyday. The wharf continued to be used by vessels employed in the coastal trade and fisheries until the late nineteenth century, but the structure gradually deteriorated during the early twentieth century and fell into disuse.

Derby Wharf Lighthouse has undergone many changes during the course of its history, as has the port of Salem. "A ship's side-light and a cast iron chimney pipe were fitted to the tower" in 1886, according to one report. The railing around the lighthouse's lantern room, apparently damaged when the bowsprit of a schooner accidentally struck it, was repaired in 1892. Because water flooded the wharf at high-tide by the beginning of the twentieth century, a footbridge was constructed between the high part of Derby Wharf and the lighthouse in 1905.

The beacon of Derby Wharf Light was upgraded in 1906 when a fourth-order lens was installed. By that year the characteristic had been changed to a flashing-red light, and was fueled by acetylene gas. The lens was replaced in 1910 with a smaller sixth-order lens, the size normally used by harbor lights at that time. The tower was painted white in 1922, perhaps to provide greater contrast between the tower and its surroundings, and the characteristic changed back to a fixed-red light. The lighthouse was illuminated by a 300 candle power electric lamp by 1930 and by the early 1970s the characteristic was again changed back to a flashing-red light.

The lighthouse was de-commissioned by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1977 and transferred to the U.S. National Park Service in 1979. At this point it faced the same problems that other abandoned lighthouses have faced in recent years—vandals, weather and neglect.

The Friends of Salem Maritime, organized in 1983, has since restored Derby Wharf Lighthouse and convinced the U.S. Coast Guard to relight the tower with a solar-powered flashing-red light. This local volunteer group and the National Park Service now share responsibility for maintenance of the tower, while the Coast Guard maintains the solar-powered beacon.

The Peabody Museum of Salem worked with the Friends, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Coast Guard to produce the Derby Wharf Lighthouse exhibit, which opened on 17 August 1986.

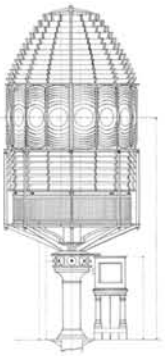
Because of the cooperative effort, the lighthouse, a part of Salem's rich maritime heritage, has been protected and its history recorded.



Top opposite page—The Derby Wharf Lighthouse at the end of the breakwater. Author photograph.

Above—The Derby Wharf, Salem, Mass. at the turn of the century. The lighthouse is barely visible in the circle. Author photograph.

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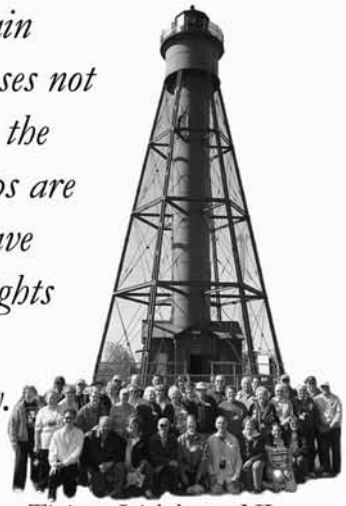
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