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Eatons Neck Light Station, Long Island

By Howard N. Knowles

Eatons Neck Lighthouse, situated on the northern extremity of Eatons Neck on a high bluff overlooking Long Island Sound, is the second oldest lighthouse on Long Island. It is located at the end of Lighthouse Road in the Village of Asharoken, Huntington Township, Suffolk County. Built in 1799 under a contract between John J. McComb, Jr., architect, and William Miller, Commissioner of Revenue of the United States Treasury Department, this sandstone structure was variously referred to in the Article of Agreement as "A Light House of Stone" and the "Octagon Pyramid".

In 1969, in a New York State Office of Planning Coordination report, titled "Long Island Landmarks", the Eatons Neck Lighthouse was given "ET" status. This meant the structure was in danger of "Eventual Threat of destruction".

Because the report indicated that the Eatons Neck Lighthouse was in possible danger of demolition or drastic renovation at some time in the future, the Northport Historical Society in 1972, supplied historical and architectural background for nomination of the Eatons Neck Lighthouse in the National Register of Historic Places.

Theophilus Eaton

Eaton's Neck was bought from the Matinecock Indians in 1646 by Theophilus Eaton, Esq., Governor of New Haven. The

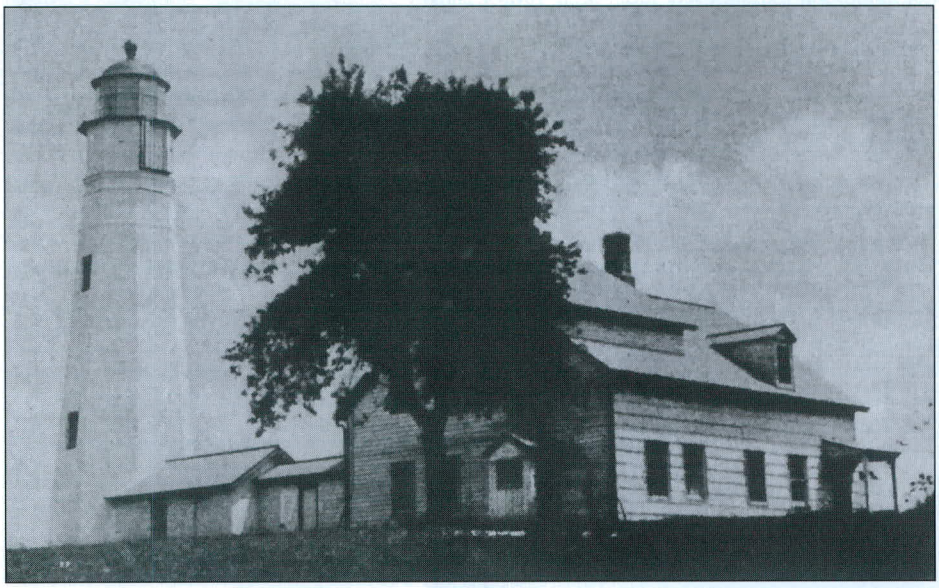


Present day Eatons Neck Light Station. The original 1799 tower still stands and is an active aid to navigation. The buildings surrounding the tower are Coast Guard housing and those below the bluff, originally the Life Saving Station, are part of today's Coast Guard station. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard

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Above – A distant view of Eatons Neck Light Station circa 1900. Note the large keepers' dwelling and covered passageway to the tower.
Below – The tower and dwelling viewed from the other side. Both photos courtesy of Northport Historical Society.



Matinecocks (one of the thirteen Long Island tribes) occupied and claimed ownership of the north shore of Long Island from Hempstead to Smithtown. Their chief was Asharoken (also spelled Resoroken, Resorocon and Raseo Kan) the Sagamore of Ketewomoke. The Matinecocks recognized the sovereignty of the Montauks on the eastern end of Long Island, whose chief was Wyandance, the Grand Sachem.

Although Eatons Neck lay within the First Purchase boundaries of the Huntington settlers, the Matinecocks saw nothing irregular in selling it to another purchaser. The Town of Huntington tried unsuccessfully to wrest ownership from Governor Eaton.

Theophilus Eaton, a wealthy London Merchant, had come from England in 1636 and became Governor of New Haven. He and John Davenport, a famous divine of the period who had arrived earlier, founded small settlements along the Sound in what became the State of Connecticut. The Gardiners were also among these adventurous early English colonists, anxious to explore and develop the new land which was plentiful with game and had many fine sheltered bays and beautiful woods. Eatons purchase on Long Island became known by his name and was part of the early settling by the English on Long Island Sound.

The Rev. Joshua Hartt

In 1795, the Rev. Joshua Hartt, a Presbyterian minister and part-time surveyor, was employed by the Town of Huntington to survey its shoreline. Hartt was a Revolutionary War patriot and native of the Dix Hills section of Huntington. Seized by the British during the war, he was imprisoned in the old prison in City Hall Park in New York, where he had as a cellmate the celebrated Ethan Allen.

Writing in his surveyor's field book, Hartt noted that "a north shore of Eatons Neck, and many vessels haven been wrecked. Hereabouts, it is expected a lighthouse will be built for the advantage of seamen".

Hartt's comment on the Eatons Neck was transmitted to Simon de Wet, Surveyor General of New York State, where it is still preserved in the State Office in Albany. It was written in his "Field Book for Huntington Town" and accompanied the town survey.

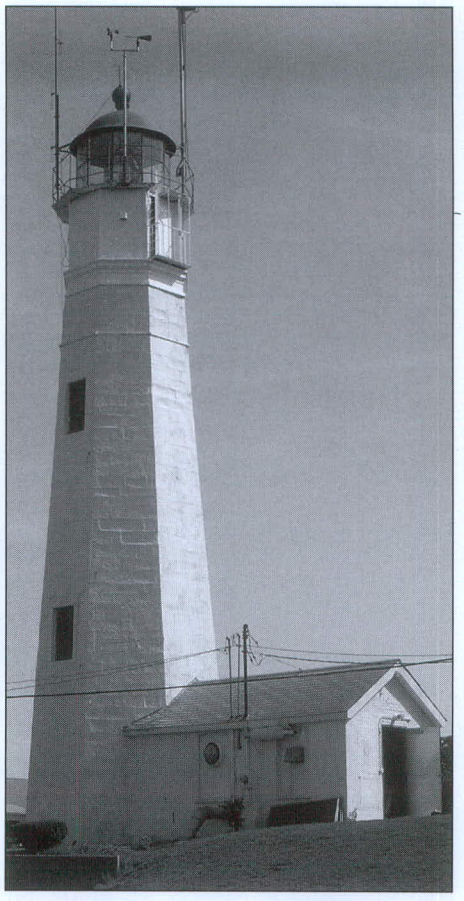


Eatons Neck Light Station circa 1934, still under U. S. Lighthouse Service control. The buildings surrounding the tower are still in the future. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.

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Eatons Neck in 1978. It appears that some of the additional housing has been built. Photo courtesdy of Northport Historical Society.



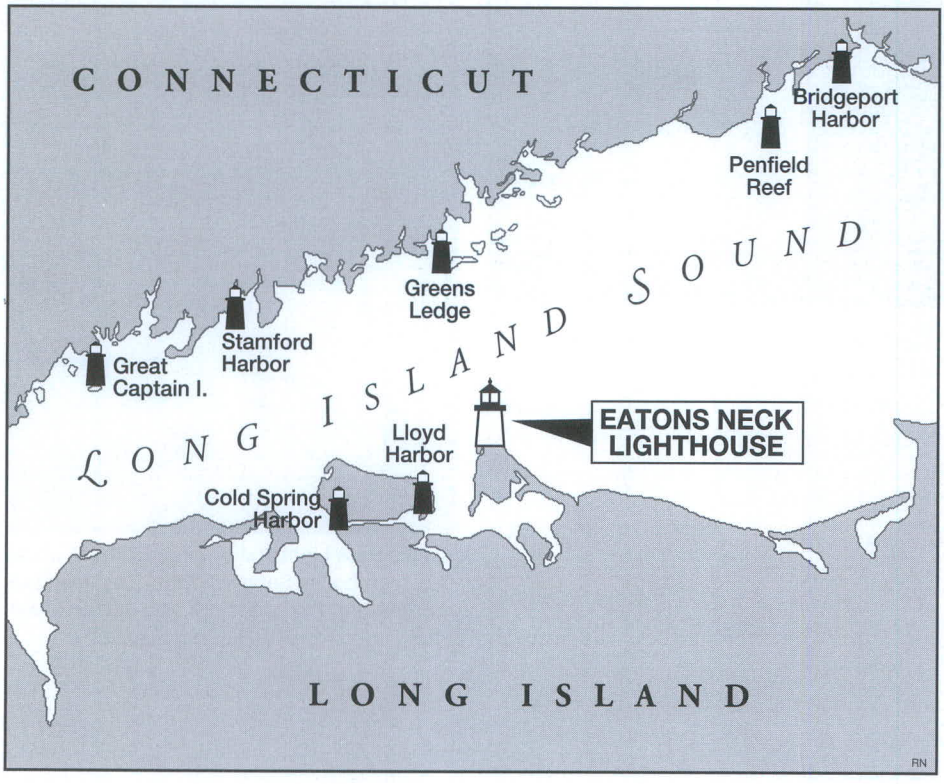
The Eatons Neck tower today. The attached shed may be part of the original structure. Photo courtesy of Rusty Nelson.

John Sloss Hobart

As a result of Hartt's report, the Federal and New York State governments acted within three years. John Sloss Hobart, Esq., the distinguished patriot, was one of the most helpful in setting up the lighthouse at the time he was a Senator (January 11-April 16, 1798). Hobart had lived on the land on Eatons Neck which his father had bought many years before.

Hobart introduced in Congress the legislation concerning the erection of the light. In a letter to Ebenezer Stevens Esq., (dated Philadelphia, March 7th, 1798) he wrote: "Dear Sir. Enclosed you have the Act for the erection of a Lighthouse on Eatons Neck. It passed the Senate yesterday with the amendments noted in the margin which will be agreed to by the House of Representatives this morning. I take this early opportunity to apprise you of it that measures may taken to obtain from the Legislature of our State the necessary (word illegible) of jurisdiction during the present session."

This letter apparently resulted from a previous one to Mr. Stevens (dated Huntington, December 19, 1797) from John Gardiner, the new owner of the land on Eatons Neck. The letter reads: "Sir. Yours of the 13th instant I have received by Mr. John McComb and according to your request I have been with him and examined particularly that part of the Neck which is called Eatons Neck Reef and have marked out a place for a lighthouse. Mr. McComb thinks that six acres of land will be sufficient for the purpose which I think should be willing to dispose… pur-



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pose of building a lighthouse for the consideration of one hundred pounds."

On March 14 1798, Congress passed an Act which read in part: "that as soon as the jurisdiction of so much of the head of land of Eatons Neck Island as the President of the United States shall deem for the purpose of a lighthouse and appurtenances shall be ceded to the United States, it shall be the duty of the Treasury to provide a contract for a lighthouse. The Act was proved by President John Adams, and the lighthouse subsequently erected at a cost of $9,500."

John J. McComb, Jr.

John J. McComb, Jr., (1763-1855) a Scotsman, (described in the Article of Agreement as "bricklayer") was the architect. He had previously designed the Cape Henry, Virginia Lighthouse, the Montauk Light in 1795, and was responsible with Joseph Mangin, a French architect, for the beautiful New York City Hall in 1812. He also designed Hamilton Grange, a Federal style building on Convent Avenue between 141st and 142nd streets in New York City, and, with Jonathan Williams, the Castle Clinton National Monument in Battery Park, New York City, in 1808-1811.

John Gardiner

The lighthouse was built on ten acres of land ceded to the United States Government in 1798 for $500 by John Gardiner and his wife Johanna, who had bought Eatons Neck in 1792. John Gardiner, born May 19, 1747, was a descendant of Lion Gardiner who had purchased Gardiner's Island from the Indians in 1638. The Gardiner family must have lived in the old manor house between Cherry Lawn Lane and the Bay, but Gardiner was never regarded as the Lord of the Manor of Eatons Neck, as Theophilus Eaton had been. Nothing remains of the manor house today except some foundation bricks. Across the road on Cherry Lane, on a little hill, there is the Gardiner family graveyard.

The lighthouse was completed and activated in 1799. Gardiner's nineteen year old son, John H. Gardiner, is said to have been the first keeper of the light, living in a nearby farmhouse.



Above – A 1988 view if Eatons Neck from the water. The sign may have said "Sailing Is Fun. Photographer unknown.

Below – The Life Saving Station on September 24, 1884. Note the nicely painted trim and the observation walkway atop the roof. Photo courtesy of Northport Historical Society.



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The Lighthouse of Stone

In the center of the glass enclosed observation platform of the lighthouse is the massive lens, imported from France, and used to refract the beam cast by the four original whale oil lamps. Today, the lens performs the same service for a 1,000-watt quartz filament light bulb. The light is triggered automatically by a light-sensitive device.

From the ceiling of the tower dangles the obsolete funnel-shaped "Smoke Ventilator." In the chamber below, there are four more copper ventilators built into the circular wall. In this room also, the giant multi-tiered lens is manufacture's legend: "Henry Lepaute a Paris."

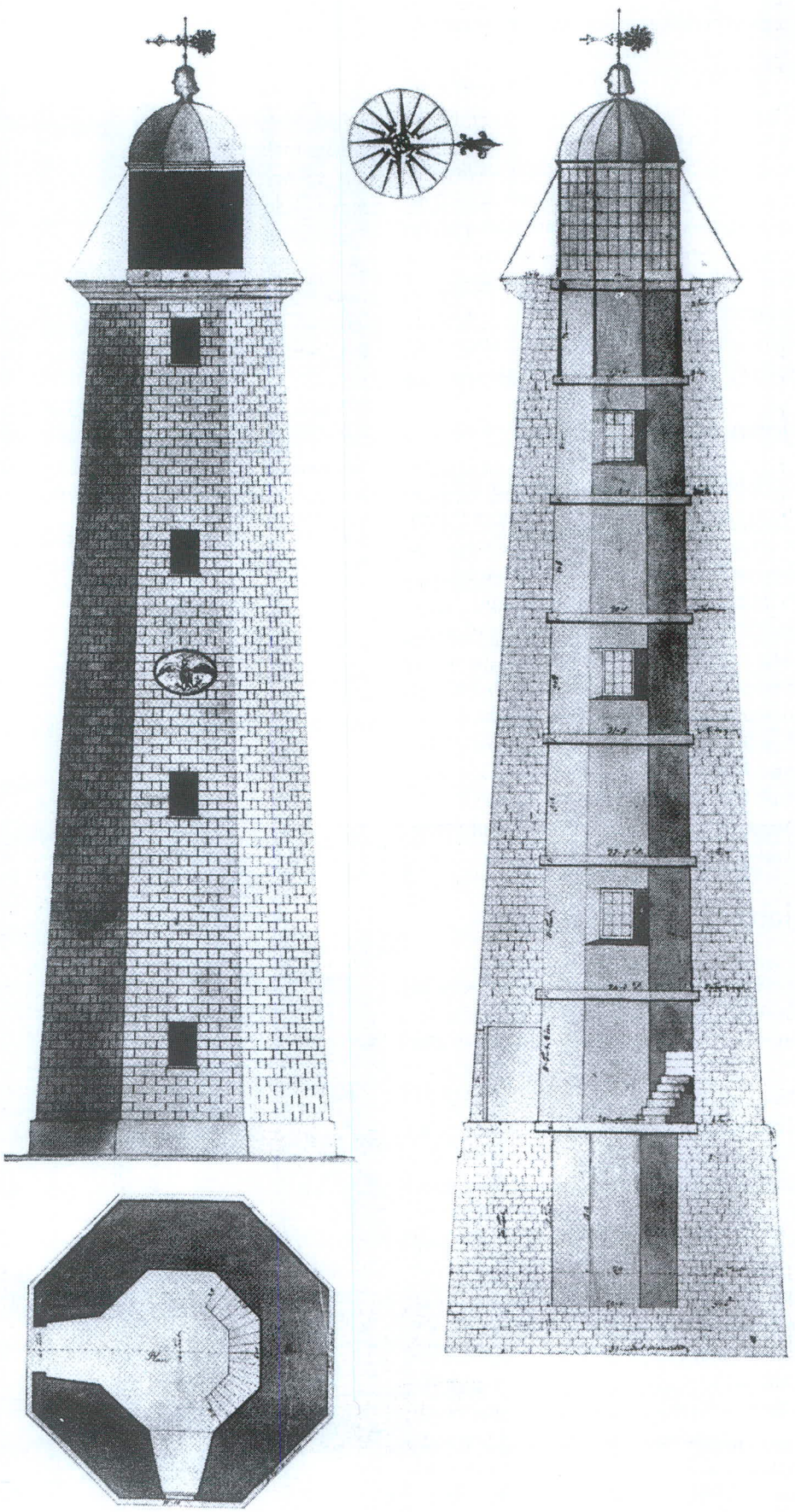
The lighthouse has been repaired and renovated several times. A fog signal was recommended in 1876, and by 1871, a powerful steam fog signal was in operation. In 1904, a first class automatic siren was installed, sounding blasts of four seconds' duration separated by silent intervals of forty seconds. In 1973, the lighthouse received a new coat of paint.

The official Coast Guard list for 1950 described the light as follows: "A white stone tower attached to a building. The structure is 73 feet above the ground and 144 feet from the water, being visible for 18 miles. It is located on the east side of the entrance to Huntington Bay at 40 57.2'N, 73 23.7'W."

The location of the Eatons Neck Lighthouse marks the area where there have been more shipwrecks than any other spot on the north shore of Long Island. The Sound, as it ebbs and flows off Eatons Neck, is vigorous, and Jacqueline Overton in her "Long Island Story" writes…"that the tides…have played their tricks with the shore line too. For instance, Huntington Harbor is made by Lloyd's Neck and Eatons Neck enclosing it. But before the sand washed in, Lloyd's Neck was an island and Eatons Neck was a group of four islands."

Mary Voyse, the most thorough historian of Eatons Neck, speaks of the storm of December 23, 1811 "when 60 ships and their crews were lost in the snow, gale and zero weather. So severe was the weather that sheep died and chickens were frozen to death."

On March 3, 1848 the first life saving station was built on Long Island. Years before (volunteer) life savers patrolled the sound



The original plans drawn up by builder John McComb, Jr. in 1798. Note the early multi-paned lantern room design and the weather vane atop the dome. Courtesy Northport Historical Society.

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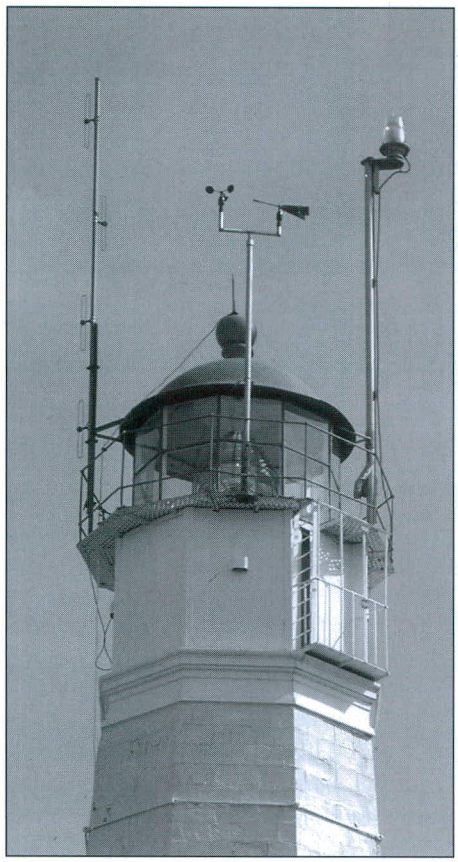
shores on foot during the night. The New York State Legislature acted on March 22, 1853 "to provide a site for a life saving station on the coast of Long Island Sound" but it wasn't until 1876, under the direction of Capitan Darius Ruland, in charge of the Eatons Neck Light since January 1862, that a "boat built of wood, very light and capable of boarding a stranded ship in almost any sea" became part of the life saving service.

The United States Treasury Department Lighthouse Service operated the lighthouse and the life saving service until 1938, when the United States Coast Guard took over the duties.

Largely through the efforts of the Northport Historical Society, the old Eatons Neck Lighthouse was designated as an historic property by the Nation Park Service on April 3, 1973, and it was entered on the National Register. Thus listed under Section 106of Public Law 89-665, passed by the Congress of the United States in 1966, the preservation and maintenance of the Eatons Neck Lighthouse should be insured on its ten acres occupied by the United States Coast Guard.

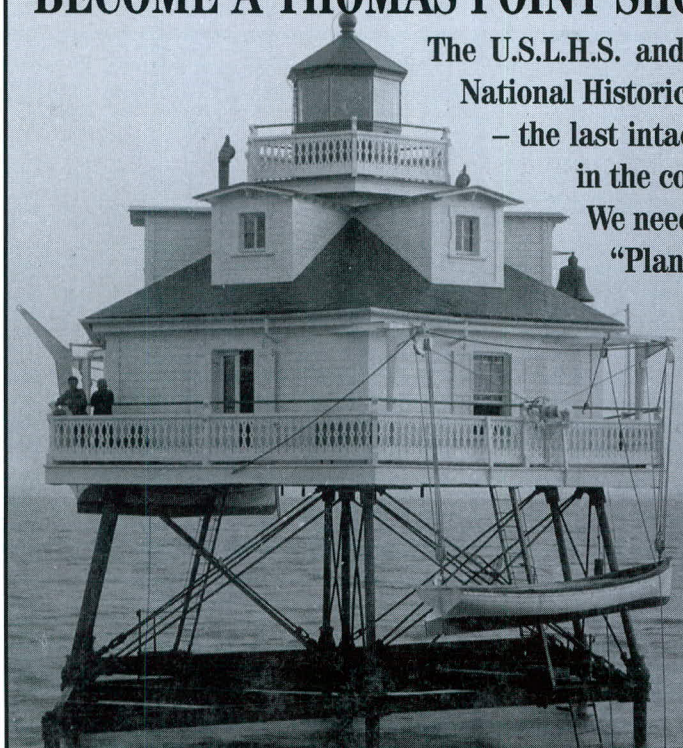
A gentile and thoughtful picture of the area where this historic landmark is located is given by Miss Voyse: "Time has been kind to Eatons Neck, and it retains more of its early beauty. Though erosion has done great damage to the beaches and hurricanes have hurt the woods, its hills and shores are still unmatched for charm. Wild life still exists. Pheasants, quail, rabbits, coons and possums are common. Occasionally a red fox or deer is sighted...plum and shade bushes still line the beach road, and also dogwood and occasional wild azaleas...wild grapes festoon the trees...".

Today, in its beautiful area and with its status as a National Landmark, Eatons Neck Lighthouse, "the lighthouse of stone," will continue to be a beacon for sailors and their ships, as it has been for almost two centuries.



Right – The top of the Eatons Neck tower showing the Fresnel lens, emergency mast, and an array of antennas and weather instruments. Photo courtesy of Rusty Nelson.

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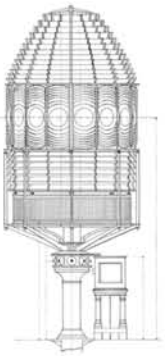
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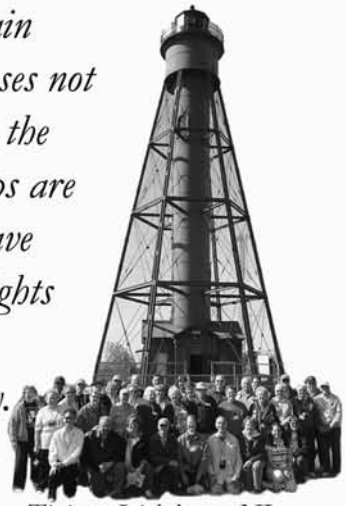
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