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FINNS POINT RANGE LIGHTS
Delaware River

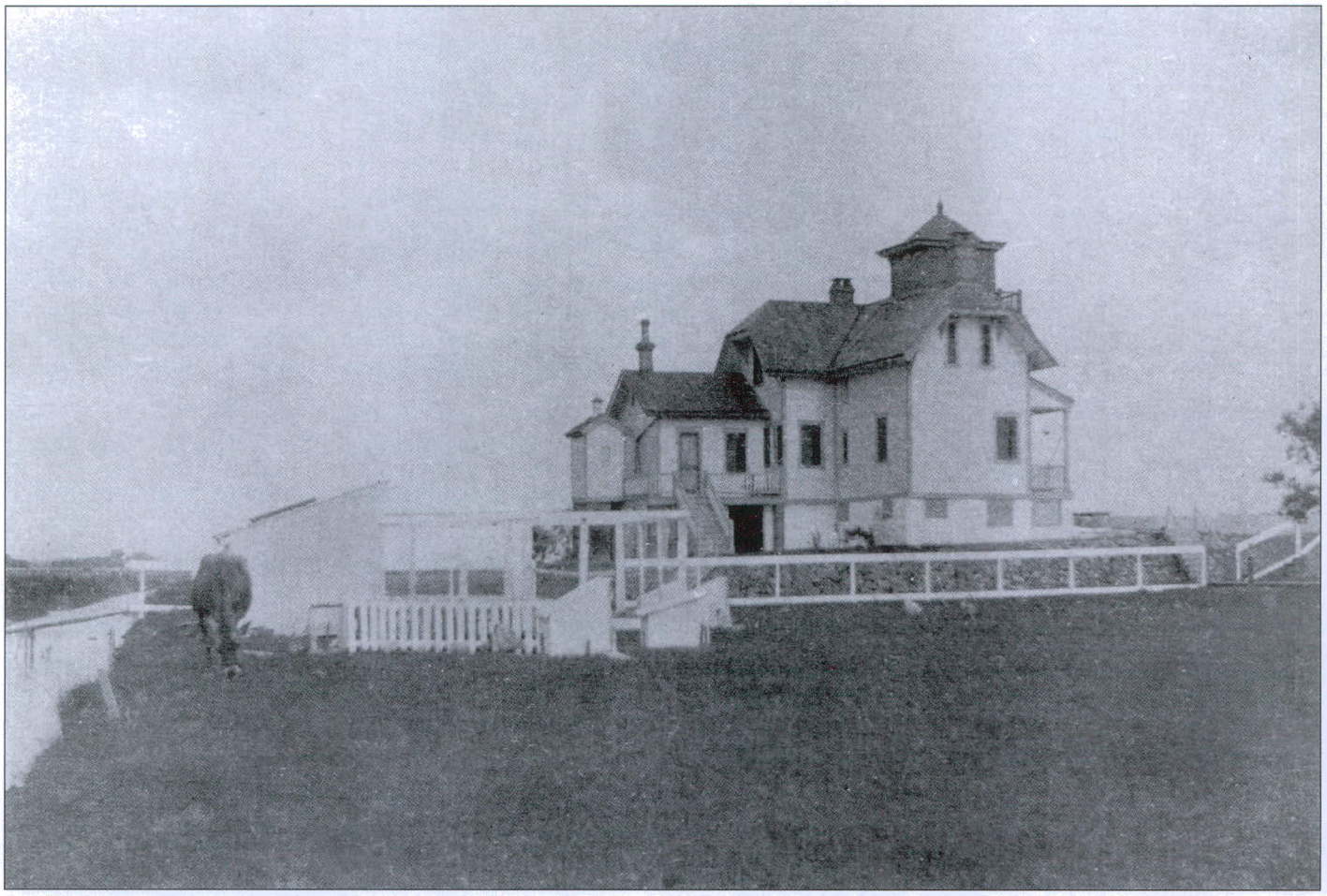
By Jim Goudy and Kim Ruth

It was only by chance that the former Finns Point Range, near the town of Pennsville, was built in New Jersey, because the original plans of the Lighthouse Service called for the range to be located in Delaware. The owner of the proposed Delaware site thought his marshland to be worth a fortune, and the Lighthouse Service declined to pay his exorbitant price. Not wishing to go through the long process of condemning his land, they found, upon further consideration, that the lighthouses could be built at the other end of the range in New Jersey near a place called Finns Point.

According to the 1875 edition of the *Annual Report of the Light-House Board*, this range was to be one of two pairs of range lights built, known early on as the Liston's Tree Range Lights. "By [an] act approved March 3, 1875, an appropriation of $55,000 was made for two sets of range-lights at or near Liston's Tree, Delaware Bay." Though it no longer stands, the landmark referred to was a tree on the Delaware side near Liston's Point. The Finns Point Range would be built to mark the reach passing Baker Shoal and Reedy Island, and the other range, to be known as Port Penn Range (located in Delaware), would mark the shipping lane from Ship John Shoal to near Reedy Island.

Finns Point Front Range Light Station

The *Description of Lighthouse Sites of the Fourth Lighthouse District, 1878* gives the location of the Finns Point Front Range Light Station as "on the east side of the Delaware River, in Salem Cove, and opposite Fort Delaware, in Lower Penn's Neck, Salem County," at 39° 35' 39" north latitude, and 75° 32' 18" west longitude. It could "be reached by West Jersey Railroad to Salem, thence by private conveyance about five miles to station, or in summer by steamboat to Salem." The parcel of land contained 10 acres, more or less, and was purchased from Robert Walker and his wife, and Francis Walker and his wife, for the sum of $1,300. The deed bore the date of April 19, 1876. The description notes: "About three acres of this lot, together with 1,100 acres of surrounding meadow, are protected by a bank five miles in length from the overflow of the tides in the river. A slough some 300 feet in



Finns Point Front Range Light Station at the edge of the Delaware Rver in 1897. National Archives photo from Fort Mott State Park.

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width occupies a portion of the lot immediately in the rear of the dwelling. The remainder of the lost is of good fertile soil, and is cultivated by the keeper. A boring at the station gave the following result: After breaking though 1 foot 6 inches of sod, stiff mud for 22 feet; at a depth of 22 feet, sand and gravel; 24 feet, clay; from 24 to 32 feet, clay with thin layers of gravel."

The publication further described the lighthouse itself, as being a frame dwelling: "...one and one half stories high, with [a] shingle roof, double weather-boarded on outside and lathed and plastered inside. It rests on stone walls founded on wooden piles. The first story Is divided into three rooms, with hall and stairways to the second floor and cellar, and shed over back door; porch and bay-window in front; the second story is divided similarly to the first, with [a] step-ladder to the lantern on the third floor; a gallery supported by brackets surrounds the lantern on front and sides."

The structure "was built by days' work, under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Wm. F. Reynolds, Engineer Corps, U.S. Army, in 1876." As for the light, it was "exhibited from a small frame tower attached to the dwelling," and was "38 feet above mean low water."

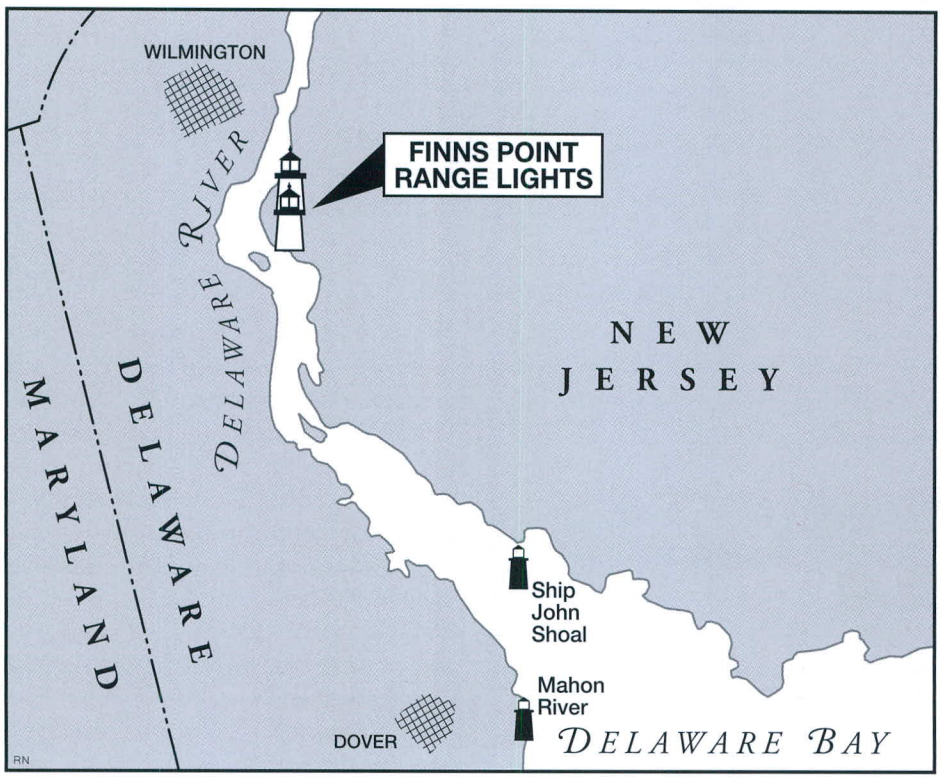
The tower was in the front and center of the dwelling, beginning just above the first floor, and reaching up one level above the building's roof. The lantern tower was square, being 9'2" on each side.



Finns Point Front Range Lighthouse as seen from the river. Photo courtesy of the author.

In 1879, the *Light List* described both the dwelling and the tower as being painted white. The 1883 List says the tower was painted red, "with [a] square day-mark on top, showing white horizontal bars; dwelling attached, white." The *Light List* from 1901 refers to the lighthouse as being simply a "red tower with white dwelling attached." Sometime after 1914 but before 1921 its coloration changed to being a black lantern on a with dwelling.

An inspection report of February 11, 1908, by draftsman Thomas J. Rout, Jr. and Major Clement A. F. Flagler, Engineer, notes that the property was only 7.2 acres in size, with about 4.8 acres being enclosed by ditches, banks, and fences. The soil was characterized as being loam. The illuminating apparatus was a 4th order range lens manufactured by Barbier and Fenestre of Paris, which showed a fixed white light which was shown for 2 seconds, and then eclipsed for one second, in continuing cycles. The eclipses were produced by occulting machinery which lifted and dropped a cylindrical shade by clockwork. The machinery, which could run for six and a half hours on one winding, was protected in a glass case marked "U.S.L.H.E. Lamp Shop, 1894." The light was produced by a "constant level, 4th order, Funk Heap burner lamp," with one wick, and was first exhibited on April 2, 1877.



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Water for the station was provided by rainwater runoff channeled into cisterns and tanks. Although this station did have a well (driven to 33 feet in 1894), the pump was broken and the water was unfit for either drinking or cooking purposes. The report also mentions three other structures on the property: a frame barn, a rough frame oil house (c. 1897), and a frame privy; all painted white, and connected with the lighthouse by plank walkways. The inspection report summed up the condition of the Finns Point Front Range Light Station in 1908 as follows: "The buildings are in fair condition. A portion of the seawall has been washed away and should be repaired. The illuminating apparatus is in excellent condition. It is proposed to build a brick oil-house at the station during the coming summer. The barn is small and inconvenient. It is proposed to build a new one during the coming summer."

Although the lighthouse itself may have been in substantially good order, the location was less than ideal, and caused reoccurring problems over the years. The *1878 Annual Report of the Light-House Board* remarks that: "…the light was necessarily placed here that it might be on the range. It is on a re-entrant curve in the bank, which forms an eddy immediately in front of the dwelling in which all the filth of this section of the river collects. To the rear of the house is an ugly swamp hole reeking with miasma [unpleasant vapors]. The bank in front should be straightened and the hole in the rear should be filled up to render the station healthy."

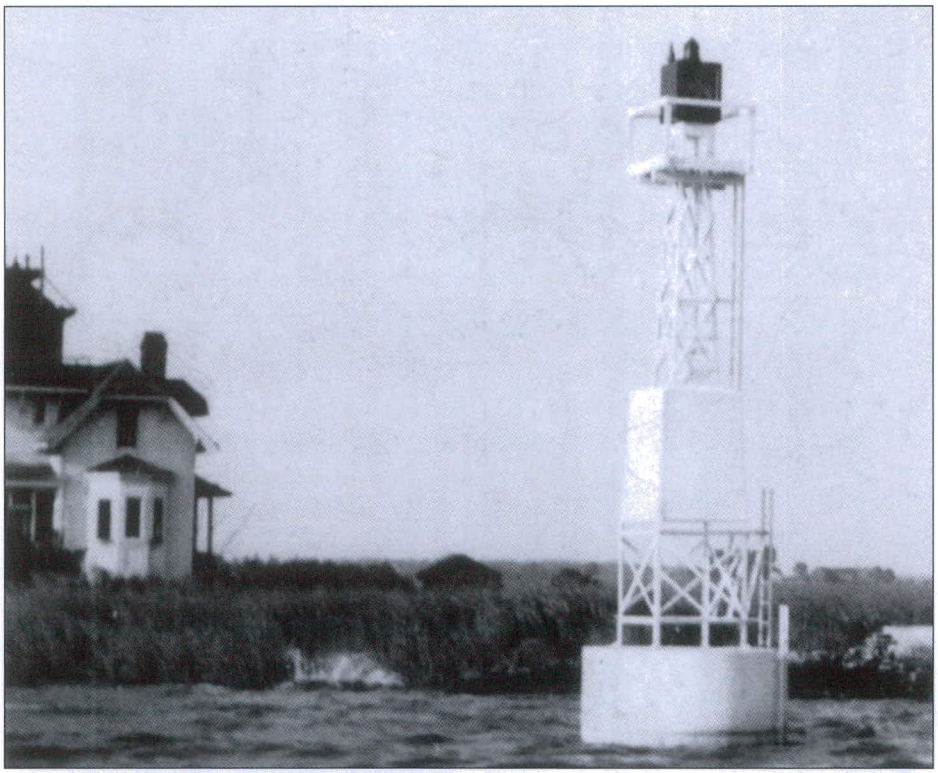
The *Annual Report for 1879* notes the damages caused to the station by the great storm of October 23, 1878, which necessitated raising the building nearly three feet. A large quantity of stone was also placed around the lighthouse at that time to protect it from storms. The *1880 Annual Report* records that four hundred perches of banking stone had to be placed on the earth bank to protect it from erosion of the waves. Finally, in 1900, a substantial stone seawall was constructed along the river in front of the lighthouse property. It was 12 feet in height, and 476 feet long, and built upon a grillage foundation that was 12 feet wide. At first it was built to follow the curve of the river, but later the part of the seawall in front of the lighthouse was rebuilt to smooth out the curve of the riverbank and eliminate the area where the floating debris had collected.

In earlier times there is said to have been a rough and narrow dirt roadway which led from a point near Fort Mott, past the lighthouse, and on toward Salem along the riverbank. The road was frequently impassable, so fuel for the station was delivered by boat. Sometime after 1930 the road was discontinued. The riverbank there has not been maintained for many years, hence the shoreline in that area has changed greatly, leaving little or no evidence that any road was ever there. The former seawall has disappeared as well.



The still standing oil house of the former Finns Point Front Range Light Station as seen from the river on October 9, 1996. Phragmite reeds normally block the view of this structure from any boaters passing by. Photo by Jim Gowdy

The Finns Point Front Range Lighthouse was discontinued in 1933, but quickly reestablished at the request of mariners in 1934. On June 9, 1938, the light was removed from the lighthouse and placed on a white skeleton tower atop a concrete base in front of the former lighthouse structure, in about three feet of water. The new front range light was powered by batteries, and serviced by boat. Notes made on July 7, 1938, on a map of the lighthouse property, indicated that the entire site was inundated at high tide, and that all property north of the seawall, including buildings, were to be submitted to the Procurement Division for disposal. The Front Range Lighthouse property was vacated, and then turned over to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Service, on April 4, 1939. The former lighthouse was then razed. The automatic light which replaced it was extinguished in 1943 because of wartime activities, relit in 1945, and continued in service until 1950. On March 22, 1950, the Finns Point Range was discontinued because it had been made obsolete by a new widening and deepening of the shipping channel, and the Reedy Island Range to the south, in Delaware, was now able to guide vessels along this part of the river.



With the former lighthouse in the background, the 1938 automated light tower of the Finns Point Front Range Light Station stands atop its concrete base in the Delaware River. Only the empty base remains. Collection of the U.S. Coast Guard.

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The site of the former Finns Point Front Range Lighthouse is now part of the Supawna Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, which is operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The property is open to the public during hunting and fishing seasons. The only access to the site is by boat. It is not easy to find because of the heavy vegetation surrounding it, but the stone foundation of the lighthouse is still in place, although now it is just at the river's edge, and there are no longer any embankments to protect it. Fifty or more feet to the east of the foundation, the brick oil shed still stands, minus the front door but with its terra cotta shingle roof still intact. The brick wall facing the river is somewhat damaged, and the floor of the oil shed almost always has water in it, even at low tide, but otherwise the structure is in surprisingly good condition. The oil shed is even harder to find than the stone foundation, because it is surrounded by thick and tall fox tail reeds, or phragmites. During an over-flight by helicopter during the summer of 1997, it was impossible to spot the roof of the fuel shed, because the phragmites had bent down over the structure's roof and hidden it from the air. Just offshore from the site, the empty concrete base, which once supported the automated skeleton light tower, sits forlornly and slightly askew.



January, 1933 view of the Finns Point Rear Range Light Station, photographed by R.C. Smith. Collection of the U.S. Coast Guard

Finns Point Rear Range Light Station

A deed dated April 20, 1876, transferred title to a tract of land for the sum of $1,200 from Joshua and Mary Dickinson upon which the Finns Point Rear Range Light Station would be constructed to the U.S. Lighthouse Service. The property was sandy, but fertile in nature, and contained 3 acres and 131 perches (one perch equals 30 ¼ square yards). The rear tower of the Finns Point Range was built about 1½ miles behind the front range lighthouse, at the coordinates 39° 37' 02" north latitude, and 75 32' 03" west longitude.

Manufactured by the Kellogg Bridge Company of Buffalo, New York, the parts of the tower were moved from Buffalo to Salem, New Jersey by railcar. From there they were loaded onto large wagons pulled by mules and slowly moved over the local roads to the construction sight. There the lighthouse tower was carefully reassembled under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel William F. Raynolds, of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The light was exhibited for the first time on the evening of April 2, 1877.

In the *Description of Lighthouse Sites of the Fourth Lighthouse District*, it is noted that: …the tower is 94 feet 8 and one half inches high from [the] base to the focal plane. It is of wrought iron, braced and supported by beams and tie-rods; the shell of the tower is of one quarter inch sheets of iron, riveted together, with the necessary openings for windows; it is 8 feet in diameter, and linedon the inside with vertical tongued-and-grooved boards; it encloses a cast-iron spiral stairway leading to [the] lantern and watch-room. The posts supporting the tower are of 9-inch I beams, braced together with 5-inch I beams and rods from one and a half to one inch in diameter. The posts have an inclination of one horizontal to six vertical; they are held to masonry piers six feet deep by bolts, two at each post, attached to a wrought-iron plate under the piers. The tower is entered through a cast-iron vestibule one story in height. The adjacent keeper's dwelling was described as: "…of frame, one and one half stories in height, shingle roof, double weather-boarded on the outside and lathed and plastered on the inside. The first story is divided into three rooms and hall, with stairway to [the] second floor and cellar; enclosed shed over back door, porch and bay-window in front. Second story is also divided into 3 rooms. There is a cellar under the house, no cistern; well in shed, of good water. It was built by day's work, under [the] direction of Lieutenant Colonel William F. Raynolds, in 1876."

The dwelling stood about 56 feet to the west of the tower, and was painted white with lead colored trim. It was built of wood, and rested on top of a stone wall foundation. A frame oil house, 7'2" x 7'2" in plan was located about 24 feet east of the dwelling. There was also a wood-framed privy. Both outbuildings were white, with lead colored trim. Although the tower was originally painted black, and remained so through at least 1894, it was listed as being brown from 1901 through 1914. After 1921, it was black again and remains so.

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The inspection report of the Finns Point Rear Range Light Station on February 12, 1908, by Fourth Lighthouse District draftsman Thomas J. Rout, Jr., and Major Clement A.F. Flagler, Engineer, provides more information about the tower's lighting apparatus. The tower was provided with two lights. The first was the main light for the range, a 4th order range lens with a diameter of 24 inches, manufactured by the firm of Barbier & Fenestre of Paris, France. Using a 4th order Funk Heap burner with one wick, the tower showed a fixed white light of about 2,700 candlepower. The other light was provided by a 5th order Hains lamp with one wick, and one panel of a lens lantern. For this second light there was a small ruby pane, set into a frame just outside the lantern wall, which , when viewed from the river, showed a fixed red light of 55 candlepower visible through 30°. The red light marked "the turn from the New Castle Range to the Deepwater Point Range."

In his report, Major Flagler commented that "the premises are in a fair condition." The zinc lining of the roof, however, was found to be in poor condition. "A wild cherry tree has grown up among the iron work of the tower and should be removed. It is planned to build a frame barn at the station during the coming summer."

The first keeper at the Finns Point Rear Range Light Station was Edward [Thomas] Dickinson who served from December 8, 1876, until December 21, 1907. During his 31 years there his annual salary remained at $500. His wife Laura became acting keeper on December 22, 1907, and she served at that position until keeper Charles W. Norton of the Finns Point Front Range Lighthouse transferred to the rear range light on January 22, 1908. The last keeper was Milton Duffield, who served as keeper from the spring of 1916 through June 10, 1933.

On March 22, 1950, the Finns Point Rear Range Light was discontinued and the light turned off for the last time. The range had outlived its usefulness, and was considered obsolete. The lighthouse tower and the adjoining keeper's house stood vacant and unneeded, and the ensuing years of neglect took their toll. Vandalism of the structures became more commonplace. On more than one occasion, the former keeper's house was a target of arson, and finally, in 1977, the dwelling had to be razed. In the 1970s a "Save the Lighthouse Committee" let by Mrs. Betty Husarik was formed. By August 30, 1978 the committee succeeded in having the lighthouse listed on the National Register of Historic Places. By 1983, the efforts of the volunteer group were rewarded when a contract was signed between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the K&K Painting Company of Baltimore, to sandblast, repair, and paint the tower. The work was completed by that November, at a cost of $33,600. On October 14, 1984, an open house was held to honor the efforts of the many volunteers involved in the restoration effort.



Finns Point Rear Range Light tower prior to 1950 while still in service. Photo courtesy of Andy Grant of Fort Mott State Park.

Today the rear range light tower of the former Finns Point Range is being well cared for, and is open to the public for tours. To find the tower site, take State Highway 49 either north or south between Salem and Pennsville in Salem County, and watch for signs pointing the way to the tower.

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Fully restored Rear Range Light shown in a 2007 photo by Jeff Gales.

Jim Gowdy was a founder of the New Jersey Chapter of U. S. Lighthouse Society which became the New Jersey Lighthouse Society, Inc., autonomous of the national group. To this day, the NJLHS maintains a constructive working relationship with the USLHS.

When Jim was 1st Vice President of the New Jersey Chapter he resigned his office to take a position on the Board of Directors of the Maurice River Historical Society, the organization responsible for the East Point Lighthouse. Typical of Jim, he saw the greater need of his organizational skills to help with the restoration and preservation of that lighthouse. However, he remained an active member of the NJLHS and returned many times to help arrange meeting sights, give presentations and tours of many of the New Jersey Lighthouses. His knowledge of all of the lights in New Jersey, on the Delaware Bay and River and across the river in the State of Delaware was unmatched. He knew the location of every lighthouse even if there was only a hole with a few pieces of concrete left. Many of us still refer to these as "Gowdy Lights".

Fortunately, he and his wife, Kim Ruth, completed the book "Guiding Lights of the Delaware River and Bay" in 1999 to leave for posterity. This article is an excerpt from that book. His knowledge and spirit lives in all of us who ever listened to him to speak about the New Jersey Lighthouses.

Jim Gowdy died on November 5, 2001 at the age of 48. He was a Division Fire Warden of the New Jersey Forest Service and a true Lighthouse Keeper.





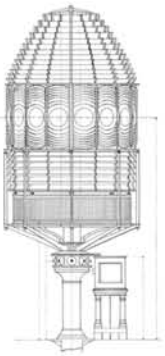


Top – The base of the Finns Point Rear Range Lighthouse, in 1982, before restoration. Photo by Kim M. Ruth.

Middle – Restored entrance to the Rear Range tower. Photo by Jeff Gales.

Bottom – Unusual interior sliding door at the base of the stairs. Photo by Jeff Gales.

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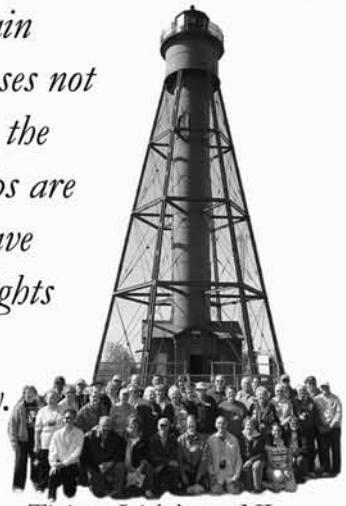
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