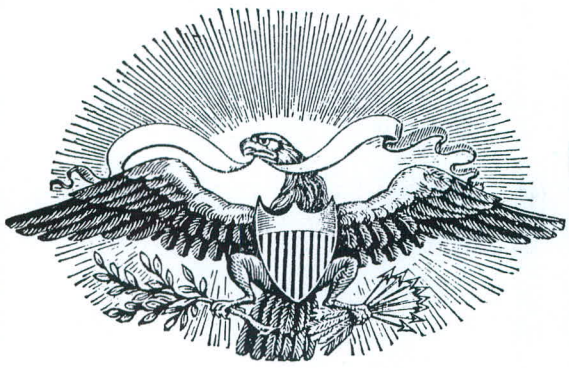
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FIRST REPORT ON THE LIGHTHOUSES OF THE UNITED STATES; HAMILTON'S REPORT TO WASHINGTON IN 1790

(Extracts from The Works of Alexander Hamilton, comprising his correspondence, and his political and official writings, edited by John C. Hamilton, Page 23, Vol. IV, New York. John F. Trow, printer. 1851.)

The act of August 7, 1789, provided for the taking over and maintenance by the United States of the lighthouses. This was the ninth law passed by the Federal Congress and was the first provision made for public works. This law provided that the lighthouses should be under the supervision of the Secretary of the Treasury, and it is interesting to note that the act providing for a Treasury Department was not passed until some time later, September 2, 1789. Alexander Hamilton was appointed Secretary of the Treasury September 11, 1789, and he had immediate supervision of the lighthouses of the United States until May 9, 1792, when he delegated this duty to Tench Coxe, Commissioner of the Revenue. The following report made by Hamilton, as Secretary of the Treasury, to President Washington on June 18, 1790, was the first official report on the lighthouses of this country:

The Secretary of the Treasury, having, in consequence of the act for the establishment and support of lighthouses, directed his inquiries to that object, begs leave most respectfully to submit the result to the President of the United States of America.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

In this State is only one lighthouse, situated on a point of land on the island of Newcastle, 3 miles from Portsmouth, without the walls of the fort which commands the entrance of the Piscataqua river. It is under the superintendence of a commissary, who is captain of the fort; and is, at present, in good repair. The annual expenses of maintaining it is estimated at $217.20.

MASSACHUSETTS

In this State are six lighthouses, at the following places, viz:

Boston,
Cape Ann,
Plymouth,
Plum Island,
Nantucket,
Portland.

The whole expense attending the support of these establishments, including the officers' salaries, is estimated at — $5,736.00

The officers appointed for their management are, at Boston, Captain Thomas Knox, with an annual salary of — $400.00

At Cape Ann, Mr. Samuel Houston, with ditto — $400

At Plymouth, the widow of the late General Thomas, with ditto — $233.50

At Plum Island, Mr. Lowell, with ditto — $220.00

At Nantucket, Mr. Paul Pinkham, with ditto — $250.00

At Portland, the building not being perfectly completed, no person is yet appointed to superintend it.

Exclusive of the above, there is an officer styled a commissary, who has the charge of supplying the whole. This office is now filled by Mr. ——— Divens, but what allowance he has for executing it, the Secretary has not yet ascertained.

When the building at Portland is completed, the expense of maintaining it, and the allowance of the commissary superintending the whole, will probably make the total amount of the lighthouse establishment in the State of Massachusetts about $6,000 per annum.

CONNECTICUT

In this State there is only one lighthouse, which is situated at the port of New London; it is built of stone, and has lately been repaired. In the month of May last, the General Assembly ordered some buoys to be fixed in the harbor for the safety of the navigation, but nothing has been yet done in consequence of the act.

The annual expense of this establishment is estimated at $450.

At New Haven there is a pier in the harbor, which is private property, and a buoy at the entrance; two other buoys are judged necessary for the safety of the navigation.

NEW YORK

At New York there is a lighthouse, and was lately a beacon at Sandy Hook, the annual expense of which (exclusive of an allowance to the wardens of the port) is about $1,500.

The number of the wardens is four, who have (besides other duties incident to their office) the charge of supplying and superintending this establishment. They have each an allowance of one dollar and a half per day when employed in visiting the works, exclusive of their provisions, &c. The master warden is Mr. Thomas Randall. The beacon has been recently blown down, and will require to be replaced; which can be done at an inconsiderable expense.

IN NEW JERSEY

There is no lighthouse, nor any establishment of that nature.

IN PENNSYLVANIA

There is a lighthouse at Cape Henlopen, and several buoys, beacons, and piers, for the security of the navigation on the Bay and River Delaware. The annual expense of these establishments, which have been under the care of a board of wardens of the port of Philadelphia, is estimated by the present master warden at $4,133.

This office is now filled by Capt. William Allibone.

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IN DELAWARE

There is no lighthouse nor other establishment of this nature, those on the Bay and River Delaware answering for that State.

IN MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA

There are at present no lighthouses, nor any beacons, buoys, &c., for the security of vessels navigating the Bay of Chesapeake. In consequence of certain acts of the legislatures of these States, styled the compact laws, considerable sums have been collected heretofore, by a tax upon tonnage, for raising a fund for the purpose of building lighthouses, &c., at Cape Henry. The commissioners appointed by the two States for superintending this work, expended on it previous to the war, in collecting materials, &c., at between 7 and L8,000, Virginia currency; but it is presumed that no considerable benefit can be now derived from this expenditure. The present expense for erecting this lighthouse, &c. (as estimated by one of the commissioners appointed on the part of the State of Virginia), is computed at $34,076.66.

The annual expense of maintaining it would probably not exceed $2,000.

IN SOUTH CAROLINA

There is one lighthouse, and the necessary buoys and beacons, for the security of the navigation into that harbor. The lighthouse is in good condition, but the buoys and beacons want repair. The annual expense attending this establishment is computed at $1,457.

The officer having charge of them at present is Mr. Thomas Hollingsby, who is recommended by the commissioners of pilotage for that harbor as a person perfectly qualified for the business. His present salary is $257.14.

GEORGIA

No information has been received from that State on this subject, although the same inquiries have been made there as in other States.

To this statement of the substance of the information, which he has received respecting the several establishments in question, the Secretary begs leave to add, that most of the persons who have been singly charged with the care of any of them, have been recommended as proper to be continued, and that no objection has been made to any; and that in the two instances in which that case has been committed to boards (as in the cases of Pennsylvania and New York), the principals of those boards are well recommended.



The Cape Henlopen, DE light station, one of the colonial lighthouses that Secretary Hamilton missed, about to succumb to erosion in 1926.

It appears to the Secretary that it will be expedient to conform to the plan which exists in Massachusetts, and to substitute individuals to boards where the business has been committed to them; and he thinks it probable that a reappointment of the persons who have been heretofore employed will be most likely to produce an eligible choice and to give satisfaction; and also that the allowances heretofore made (as far as they apply) will be a good standard for those to be established. As, however, it is the intention of the legislature that the expenditures for these establishments should be made by contract, which, from the nature of the objects, must generally be conducted on the spot, it seems advisable, for this and other reasons, which will occur, that in the distant States there should be some other persons than the immediate superintendents of the lighthouses connected with them in the business.

As a temporary arrangement for this purpose the Secretary would propose that the particular superintendents in the several States, except Pennsylvania and New York, should be put under the direction of the collectors of the principal ports:

In New Hampshire, of the collector of Portsmouth.

In Massachusetts, of the collector of Boston.

In Connecticut, of the collector of New London.

In South Carolina, of the collector of Charleston.

Georgia is omitted, from the want of information.

Pennsylvania and New York are excepted, because their contiguity to the seat of government will place the particular superintendents sufficiently under the eye of the Secretary of the Treasury.

Pursuant to the foregoing ideas, the Secretary submits the following nominations:

At Boston, Capt. Thomas Knox, with a salary of — $400 per an.

At Cape Ann, Mr. Samuel Houston, with do. of — $400 per an.

At Plymouth, the widow of the late General Thomas, with do. of — $240 per an.

At Plum Island, Mr. ——— Lowell, with do. of — $220 per an.

At Nantucket, Mr. Paul Pinkham, with do. of — $250 per an.

At New London (a person to nominated by General Huntington), with do. of — $100 per an.

At New York, Mr. Thomas Randall, with do. of — $400 per an.

At Philadelphia, Mr. William Allibone, with do. of — $500 per an.

At Charleston, South Carolina, Mr. Thomas Hollingsby, with do. of — $260 per an.

No account having been received at the Treasury of the completion of the lighthouse erecting at Portland in Massachusetts, the Secretary has not included it in the present nomination; he has also omitted the port of New Haven in Connecticut, as the pier and buoys in the harbor appear to be private property, not that of the State.

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In the States of Virginia and Maryland, it appears from what is above stated in this report, that there are no establishments in those States, although materials have formerly been collected for building a lighthouse at Cape Henry. As the act of the seventh of August last relative to the support of lighthouses, &c., renders it necessary to obtain a cession of a proper place near the entrance of the Chesapeake previous to the erection of a lighthouse in that quarter, the Secretary submits it to the consideration of the President, whether it would not be advisable to determine on the place best adapted for such an establishment, in order that an application may be made to the supreme executive of the State under whose jurisdiction the same may be, for a cession of the same.

It will be observed, that the Secretary has not mentioned a person for taking charge of the lighthouse at New Hampshire. The present commissary (as before stated) is the captain of the fort, near whose walls the lighthouse is situated. The collector of the port of Portsmouth is of opinion that the care of it should be intrusted to the captain of the fort, but has said nothing as to the qualifications of Mr. Clap for this office; or of the allowance made to him on this account by the State; the Secretary therefore submits the propriety of deferring any appointment for this place till further inquiry is made on these points, to which immediate attention will be paid.

With respect to the duties of the general superintendents, as the act contemplates the maintaining, supporting, and erecting the establishments to be by contract, the Secretary is of opinion, that in all cases where the nature of the service or supply will possibly admit of the same being so done with advantage to the public, the superintendents should be authorized to enter into a contract for the same, subject to the ratification of the Secretary of the Treasury, with the approbation of the President; and where the same can not be so done, that the general superintendents shall direct the execution of the necessary business at as low a rate as possible.

This line the Secretary is induced to suggest, as he finds, on an investigation of the different objects of expenditure accruing under these establishments, that cases will sometimes occur (especially in the repair of works and replacing buoys, etc.) where it will not be possible to establish any principles of calculation for doing the same by contract; in which case the party contracting (should such be found) would either demand an extravagant allowance for securing him against the possibility of risk, or endeavor to avoid the same by executing his contract in an efficient manner.

All which is respectfully submitted.

(Signed) ALEXANDER HAMILTON,
Secretary of the Treasury.

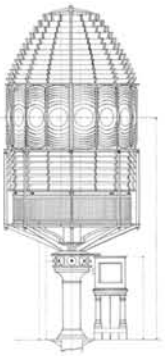
Actually Hamilton was incorrect as there were 12 lighthouses in 1790. Perhaps it was the lack of telephones and FAX machines that caused the erroneous count.

Boston, MA	1716
Brant Point, MA	1746
Beavertail, RI	1749
New London, CT	1760
Sandy Hook, NJ	1764
Cape Henlopen, DE	1765
Charleston, SC	1767
Plymouth (Gurent), MA	1769
Portsmouth, NH	1771
Cape Ann (Thacher I.), MA	1771
Great Point, MA	1769
Newburyport, MA	1788



Sandy Hook, NJ light station in 1880. This is the only surviving colonial lighthouse. Note the keepers at the base and lantern room. USLHS photo.

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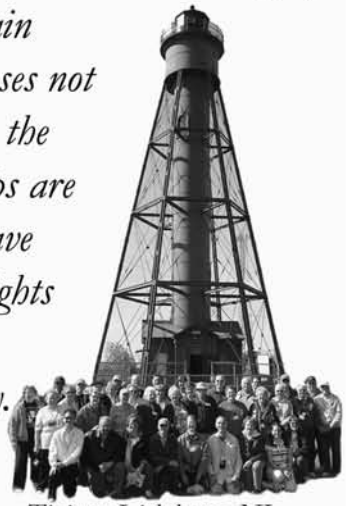
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