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# Only Yesterday

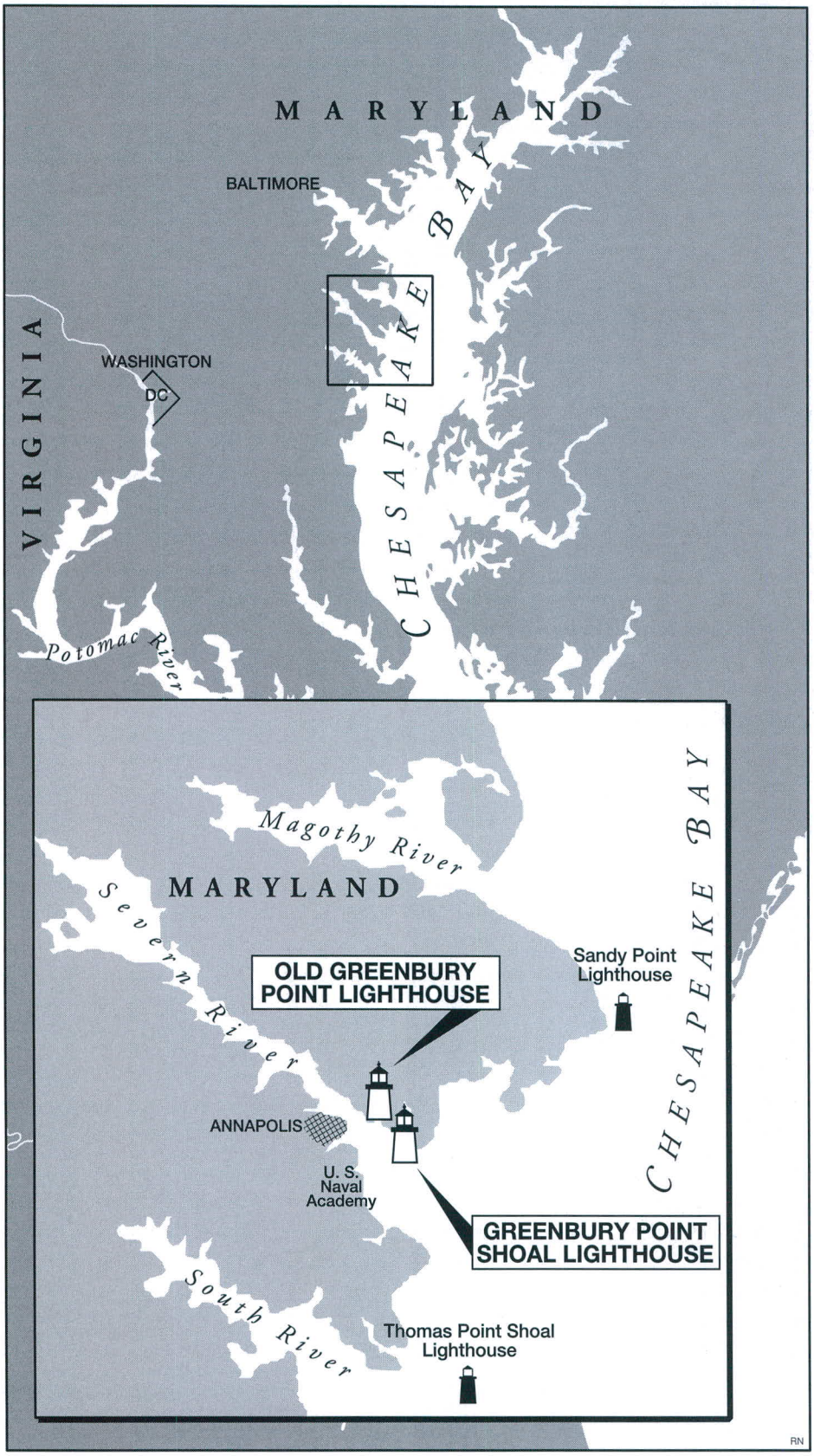
By George Worthylake



**The first lighthouse at Greenbury Point, MD. Note the unusual weather vane on the lantern. 1885 photo by Major Jared Smith. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.**

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# Greenbury Point and Shoal Lighthouses




Due to a heavy increase in commerce into Annapolis Harbor and the Severn River, the Maryland House of Delegates passed a resolution to petition the Lighthouse Service to construct a lighthouse on Greenbury Point, on the north side of the entrance into Annapolis Harbor. A year later Congress appropriated $3,500 on March 3, 1847.

Fifth Auditor Pleasonton instructed the Collector of Customs in Annapolis to select a site for the new station and purchase the necessary acreage. He selected Greenbury Point, but the fly in the ointment was that the owner, Lemuel Taylor, didn't want to sell his property. He placed an inflated asking price of $1,500 on the four acres the government had selected.

Pleasonton suggested to the Maryland legislature that they formally seize the land under eminent domain proceedings and place a value on the acreage. On March 11, 1848 they met and declared the 3 3/4 acres worth $367. They awarded Taylor that sum plus offered an additional $133 for a right of way for a public road. However, Pleasonton denied funds for a right of way and declared that the keeper could use a boat to communicate with Annapolis.

Collector of Customs Cole awarded a contract to build the lighthouse to William Hooper. His low bid of $2,645 was $900 less than the amount appropriated by Congress. In addition to constructing the combination dwelling and tower, the contract required him to install a nine lamp and reflector system in the lantern room. The completion deadline was October 1, 1848. Ultimately the antiquated reflector system was replaced by a 6th order Fresnel lens in 1855.

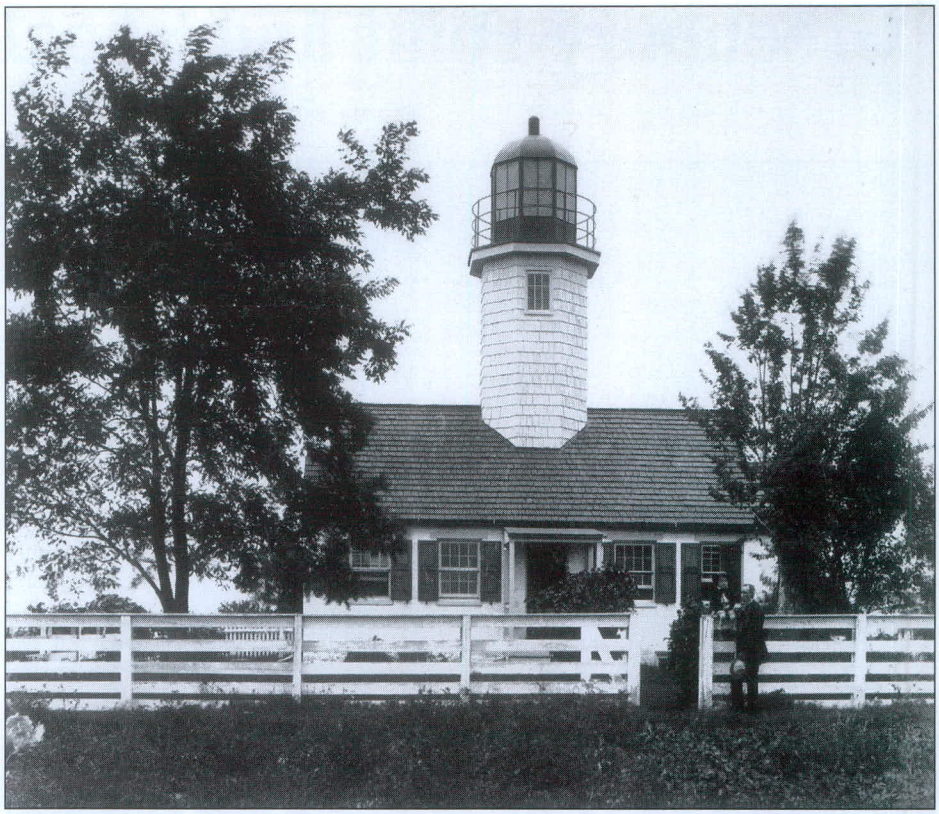
Pleasonton had knowledge that the contractor had produced shoddy work with other contracts and instructed Cole to appoint a supervisor to ensure the work was done correctly (according to the contract) and finished on time. By October 1st the work had not been competed and Pleasonton grew impatient. The lighthouse was completed sometime in late December. A carpenter was engaged to check out the work and he declared it satisfactory.

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The dwelling, with a tower rising from its roof, measured 20 by 34 feet and consisted of four rooms with an attached kitchen.

The first keeper, Levin Wheeler, lighted up the reflector system in December 1848. Wheeler served only 13 months when he was removed. His potential replacement declined the position after he visited the dwelling. An inspector from the local Collector's office visited the Greenbury Point Lighthouse and declared it worthless. Doors would not close, the lantern leaked and the basement had three feet of water in it. Repairs were finally made at a cost of $130 and a new keeper appointed.

Several of the early keepers were removed or resigned. Robert Wilson served from November 8, 1853 to July 20, 1859, when he was removed. Benjamin Smithicum succeeded Wilson but only lasted from July 20, 1859 to May 22, 1861. Smithicum's replacement, William Freeman, lasted slightly longer – from July 20, 1861 to November 1862, and then resigned. Perhaps the paltry pay – only $350 a year – had sometime to do with many of the early resignations.



**Greenbury Point Lighthouse shortly before being discontinued. National Archives photo.**

The lighthouse was not in an ideal location to serve mariners entering and leaving Annapolis Harbor as it was some distance from the navigation channel. Additionally, within a few years, lights from the nearby expanding Naval Academy and other new buildings caused confusion. The *1878 Annual Report of the Lighthouse Service* predicted doom for the structure. It noted that the shoreline near the lighthouse was eroding and would eventually undermine the it.

In 1888, Congress, at the request of the Lighthouse Service, appropriated $25,000 to place a new lighthouse off Greenbury Point, near the navigation channel, to take the place of the one on shore. Borings of the Chesapeake Bay bed were conducted in 1889. The results influenced the Service to begin plans for the construction of a screw-pile structure offshore of Greenbury Point. A second lighthouse, at Shark's Fin Shoal was constructed at the same time and of the same design. The metal work for the piles and structural braces was contracted out. The wooden house/tower portion for the two structures was constructed at the Service's depot at Lazaretto Point, in Baltimore.

The 1892 Annual Report states, "At the date of the last annual report, the superstructure of this light-house had been prepared at the depot, and the iron work was ready for erection at the site. On July 28, 1891, the position of the new structure was fixed and the work on the foundation was begun. On August 6, the piles were in place; but it was noticed that while the piles were being driven, the shoal failed to give the resistance needed for safe support of the structure. The work was therefore stopped until means of strengthening the foundation were provided. For this purpose, the method that was successful for Gull Shoal, NC, under similar conditions, was adopted. This method was by means of cast-iron disks, as of great diameter as spaces between the ironwork would allow, to which cast-iron sleeves were fastened securely. The sleeves and disks were then slipped over the piles, and forced down until the disks had obtained a solid bearing on the shoal. The sleeves were then firmly bolted to the piles. In this way the bearing surface was greatly increased. This made a delay of six weeks and work was not resumed on the light-house until September 14, 1891... the rest of the iron work was put in place and then the erection of the house frame was carried rapidly forward. The work was completed on October 8, except the painting and removal of the work platform. The platform was then taken down by the two men left in charge of the station pending the arrival of the keeper, and the painting was done on October 19, during the visit of the tender *Jessamine*. The light was exhibited for the first time on the night of November 15, 1891, as announced by the Notice to Mariners. The structure comprises a hexagon wooden dwelling on seven screw piles, supporting a lantern showing a fixed white 4th order light. The fog bell is struck by machinery, a double blow every ten seconds. Greenbury Point was discontinued when the new light was shown. The old light-house will be retained as a daymark.

Benjamin Suit had been keeper of the old Greenbury Point Lighthouse since June 4, 1867. When the new lighthouse was ready he transferred to that structure, but possibly didn't like living out on the water as he resigned a month later. His son, J.B. Suit took over and served for the next six years until he was transferred.

One of the threats to the numerous screw pile-type lighthouses, which at one time dotted Chesapeake Bay and connecting rivers, was ice. Winter's chilly temperatures cause the rivers to freeze over and occasionally even portions of the Bay freeze. When thawing

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occurs, sheets of ice begin to drift down the rivers into the Bay and then south, threatening the fragile screw-pile structures. Those obviously in harms way were provided "ice breakers"; V-shaped pile structures on the upriver side, which tended to beak up ice flows as they neared the lighthouse. A few, however, like Greenbury Point Shoal, were seldom threatened and ice breakers were not provided. In February 1918, John Berentsen, the keeper of the Greenbury Point Shoal Lighthouse, reported, "You are respectfully informed that at 1 o'clock this morning the ice broke adrift; at 1:30 a.m. the lamp in the lens upset and was put out of commission, and a minute later the lens fell off the pedestal and broke all to pieces, together with storm panes. There are two panes needed for the lantern and a new lens. Everything in the house was upset except the stove and water tanks. The ice is very heavy and lots of ice yet to come."

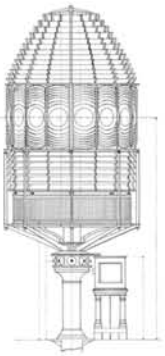
The old Greenbury Point Lighthouse stood dark and silent for many years before eventually collapsing. The new Greenbury Point Shoal Lighthouse served until 1934 when the cottage portion was removed, replaced by a small skeleton tower erected atop the pile portion to support an automated beacon. Even today a solar-powered light and electronic fog signal serves the mariner from that location.

For many years vessels passing into and out of Annapolis Harbor, some, training midshipmen, were guided by the winking light of the Greenbury Point Shoal Lighthouse. Occasionally the friendly keeper greeted the passing vessels from the railing of his cottage style lighthouse… and it seems Like Only Yesterday.



**Greenbury Point Shoal Lighthouse off Greenbury Point. Note the outhouse on the left side, main deck, and the fog bell and station boat on the right side. The structures in the distance are Navy radio station antennas. National Archives photo, date unknown.**

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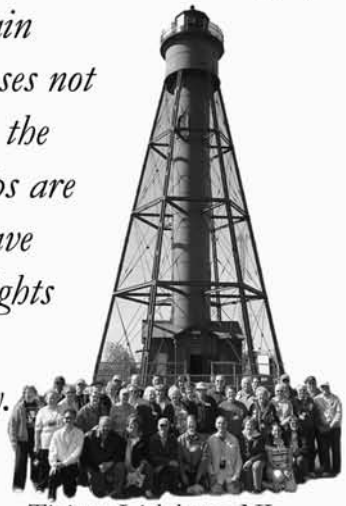
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