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Montauk Pt. Lighthouse: George Washington's Lighthouse

By Michael Salvarezza

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[Surf casting at Montauk Point Lighthouse, NY. ...](#)

Photo by: Eco-Photo Explorers

landmarks: the Montauk Point Lighthouse. Here, as the days grow shorter and the warm summer breezes reluctantly give in to crisp autumn winds, fishermen can be found everyday, casting their lines among the rocks and boulders that litter the easternmost point of Long Island. Huge migrations of fish pass by, the water boiling with activity as predatory bluefish and striped bass prey on even larger populations of baitfish. For the sport fisherman, it is heaven on earth for a few short weeks until the wicked winter weather closes in and icy blasts of North Atlantic air drive even the hardest among them home for a hot bowl of clam chowder.



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[Montauk Point Lighthouse from the air. Copyright ...](#)

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end of Long Island, taking their toll on shipping into and out of these ports. Ships that departed New York City eastward had to endure a long, lonely

Mention Montauk Point to any Long Island surfcaster and his eyes will glaze over, his mood turning to reverence as he recalls the fabled October runs of striped bass, bluefish and albacore that pass by the point every year. As the summer crowds depart and the weather begins to hint at winter, the confluence of ocean currents, offshore weather patterns and wildlife migrations create a bonanza for the recreational sport fisherman. And nowhere is this more evident than in the shadow of one of Long Island's most famous and recognizable

The lighthouse at Montauk Point is a centuries-old sentinel for all of this activity. The story of this light began as our nation was fighting for its independence. Shortly after the Revolutionary War, the new American government realized that it needed to stimulate trade with other nations if it was to grow and prosper. The ports of New York, Baltimore and Philadelphia were viewed as critical to this effort. Dangerous shoals and rocky reefs surrounded Montauk Point, a dangerous stretch of land jutting out into the open Atlantic at the eastern



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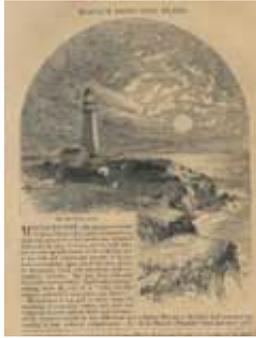


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[Montauk Light as depicted in the September 1871 ...](#)

stretch of largely unbroken south shore beach with only a handful of inlets for shelter. All along this beach, brigs, sloops, ketches and schooners lay wrecked in the sands and shifting shoals of Long Island's south shore.

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[Montauk Lighthouse as it appeared before its ...](#)

In 1792, Congress appropriated the land upon which the lighthouse stands today for a cost of \$255.12. Three years later, George Washington authorized the construction of the lighthouse. The bid to build this structure was awarded to New York bricklayer John McComb, Jr. His bid was for \$22,200.



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[The front entrance of Montauk Point Lighthouse as ...](#)

Construction of the lighthouse atop Turtle Hill was completed on November 5, 1796. The lighthouse was first lit in April 1797, originally burning whale oil. At its base, the lighthouse was designed to have a

28-foot diameter base with walls nine feet thick. At the top of the

80-foot octagonal tower, the walls are three feet thick. The light continued to burn whale oil for a half century until, in the 1850s, the great sea mammals became too scarce and lard oil was substituted for several years until a kerosene wick was installed in the 1860s. It was in 1860 that a first order Fresnel lens was also installed into the tower.

Photo by: Eco-Photo Explorers

The history of the lightkeepers at Montauk began in 1796, with the appointment of Jacob Hand on November 4. Jared Hand, Henry Baker, Patrick F. Gould, Silas P. Loper and Captain Jonathan A. Miller are among the names of the dedicated men who served on this assignment. The lighthouse at Montauk, as were many of the nation's early lighthouses, was situated in a desolate part of the land. The keepers of these lights, and their families, led solitary and lonely lives. The nearest town was 20 miles away in East Hampton and often, during the harsh winter months, piles of snow and ice would make the trip into town impossible along the single rock road that joined the two.

The lighthouse at Montauk has often been the focal point of wartime activities. During the War of 1812, it served as a central landmark for ships of the British Armada that were endeavoring to institute a blockade of the Long Island Sound. During WWII, many feared that a New York invasion might be staged from the nearby sea lanes off Montauk. The threat of German submarines (U-Boats)

operating in close proximity to New York was also a concern. Because of this mounting fear, a series of coastal observation bunkers and a fire-control/sub-spotting tower were added to the Eastern Defense Shield at Montauk Point. Remnants of buildings, bunkers and a network of 16-inch gun emplacements still remain and continue to look

toward the horizon at the US Army's former Camp Hero (originally commissioned in 1942). Today, visitors to the light can find the remains of these activities throughout the grounds of the park.

The lighthouse has stood resolute since its construction shortly after the birth of our nation. The most significant threat to its existence, however, has come from the constant battle between land and sea that is waged daily at its base. The lighthouse was built 297 feet from the edge of a tall bluff overlooking the turbulent Atlantic but over the years, this distance has shrunk to around 50 feet. Strong waves and storm-tossed seas perpetually eat away at the base of the bluff. By the late 1960s, it became evident that, unless something was done to stop this erosion, the lighthouse at Montauk would

eventually fall into the sea.

In 1969, a woman named Giorgina Reid asked for permission to test her erosion control system at Montauk. Giorgina and her husband had previously purchased a small, two-bedroom cottage near Rocky Point on Long Island's north shore in the 1960s and had managed to stabilize the bluff upon which their house stood through an ingenious combination of land terracing, rocks and natural planting. So, armed with this experience, Giorgina Reid, a woman of retirement age with no engineering background, set out to protect the most famous landmark on Long Island.

For over 15 years, Mrs. Reid toiled to establish an erosion control system on the flanks of the bluff at Montauk. Using her method of terracing the land and shoring up the bluff with rocks and plantings of natural grasses and shore plants, Mrs. Reid tried valiantly to control the ravages of erosion at the bluff. Eventually, her work was completed and her system proved successful: the erosion had been stopped in its tracks. The Montauk Lighthouse, and all those who cherish it, owe its existence today to the efforts of Giorgina Reid. Sadly, Mrs. Reid passed away in 2001 at the age of 92. Despite suffering from Alzheimer's disease, her family recalls that she never forgot the lighthouse atop Turtle Hill nor the project she completed to save it.

Today, the lighthouse is equipped with a Vega VRB-25 DC lens. The light has a range of 15-22 miles and flashes every five seconds.

As you stand at the base of the lighthouse, the sound of waves crashing against the huge boulders that are strewn across the skirt of the bluff, it is difficult to avoid becoming silent with reflection. Looking out over the vast Atlantic Ocean, you imagine the untold numbers of ships that have passed this way, everything from sloops to schooners, brigs to sailboats, fishing boats to nuclear submarines, and you realize how important this lighthouse has been to the safety of these mariners. Above you, a tern rides the air currents and then swiftly dives into the churning water, emerging moments later with a small fish in its beak. The waters here are alive with marine life. Fishermen know this and come in pilgrimage in the autumn months. And, as they cast their lines to the sea, hoping for a strike, praying for a trophy fish, the lighthouse at Montauk stands over their shoulder, watching, ever vigilant, ever present, ever on guard. There are few places that contain such history, both natural and human. Montauk Point is one of those places.

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