

STORIES of New Jersey

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1060 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

SAFEGUARDS OF OUR COAST

New Jersey, except for a small strip along the northern border, is surrounded by water, nearly 300 miles of which is navigable. The gentle coast line is outlined by many miles of broad beaches where children romp safely in the curling breakers; and is indented by coves and inlets that offer safe harbors for gay yachts and fishing boats. But beyond the level shore are treacherous shoals and sand bars that have been the dread of mariners from the days of Henry Hudson and the Dutch, Swedish and English settlers who followed him. The newcomers to these shores in the early days, without a signal to warn them, took their chances against being grounded on a sand bar and being battered to pieces by the waves.

The first American lighthouse was built to protect the shipping of Boston. Its lighting on September 17, 1716 was hailed as an epoch-making event. Sixteen oil lamps placed in groups of four furnished the illumination. The cost of maintaining the light and the salary of the keeper were paid from a tax imposed on all vessels putting in to the harbor. In the next 40 years two more beacon towers were built along the rocky New England coast.

As late as 1761 there was no warning signal or other aid to navigation in New York Harbor. The merchants of the city organized a lottery to raise funds for the construction of a lighthouse and bought four acres of land on Sandy Hook. So lagging was public interest that a second lottery was necessary to produce enough money to complete the project.

On June 11, 1764 the Sandy Hook light first shone out over the dark ocean. The nine-story octagonal masonry tower rising to a height of 85 feet was a notable skyscraper at the time. The light from 48 oil blazes set in glass-sided lanterns made it the most powerful light on the continent. Of all the early colonial lights the sturdy Sandy Hook tower with its brick-lined walls, seven feet thick at the base, is the only one remaining intact and in service today. At the time of its construction it stood about 500 feet from the northern extremity of the Hook. The tides of nearly 175 years have piled the sand around it so that today the shore line extends a quarter of a mile beyond the tower.

When the British fleet gathered off New York Harbor in 1776 a party of adventurous Americans dismantled the light in order to confuse the enemy. A landing party was forthwith dispatched to restore it. Shortly afterward the Americans tried again to destroy the light by using a small field gun mounted in an open boat. They succeeded in damaging the tower somewhat before they were driven off.

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