

THE STORY OF HOOPER'S STRAIT LIGHTHOUSE

as told by Robert H. Burgess, Curator of *Mariner's Museum*, Newport News, Virginia, at the dedication of the lighthouse, May 20, 1967, at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Navy Point, St. Michaels, Md.



Courtesy of the Mariner's Museum

Hooper's Strait Lighthouse in 1908

Of all the changes which have swept over the Chesapeake and its tributaries during the past quarter century, none has had such a drastic effect upon the scene as the removal of the screw-pile lighthouses, those bug-like structures situated offshore in our waterways. To the casual passerby they were picturesque and seemingly a permanent fixture. To the cruising and racing man these aids to navigation were ever present and aided him on his course. Anyone who sails the bay and its rivers today can appreciate the lighthouses after trying to pick up their replacements in the day time.

Today we have gathered to do honor to one of the remaining few of her kind, the Hooper's Strait screw-pile lighthouse. Once very numerous in the Chesapeake Bay region, these structures have dwindled to two active in Maryland waters. One exists in Virginia.

Of those in Maryland, one is Thomas Point which is still manned. This is an important light station with a main light, air operated fog signal, and calibration transmitter, located in a busy waterway off the mouth of the South River. The other is Seven Foot Knoll, off the mouth of the Patapsco River and which has been automatic since 1948. Drum Point, on the Patuxent River near Solomons Island, exists but is inactive. That has been replaced by a beacon erected offshore and the lighthouse has been given to the State of Maryland.

The one remaining in Virginia is White Shoal Lighthouse built in 1855 in the lower James River and now under private ownership but long abandoned.

Let's take a brief look at the lighthouse service organization and then lead into the career of the Hooper's Strait lighthouse. On August 7, 1789, the 9th Act of the First Congress took over the existing lighthouses of which there were twelve and three nearing completion in Maine, Georgia, and North Carolina.

The State of Virginia had gathered materials for building one at Cape Henry. These and the buoyage system were placed under the control of the Treasury Department and remained under their hand until 1903 when the Department of Commerce took over. On July 1, 1938, that operation was transferred to the United States Coast Guard.

Before the Civil War, the aids to navigation in this area included a great number of light vessels, many of which were in waters not subject to heavy seas and but rarely in ice of such mass and strength as to make it dangerous to permanent structures. The ravages of war had

swept away all the light vessels in the North Carolina Sounds and those in the lower Chesapeake.

In reestablishing these stations at the conclusion of the War, the opportunity was presented to carry into effect an objective long held in view by the board, to replace lightships whenever practicable by permanent structures because of their greater economy both in construction and maintenance. Generally, the stations occupied by light vessels in these somewhat protected waters were of such character that the screw pile lighthouse was the most satisfactory form of construction owing to the shallow water and formation of the bottom of the bay and its rivers.

Just what is a screw pile lighthouse? That type of construction was invented by an Englishman, Alexander Mitchell. The screw pile, the foundation represented by the pilings under this lighthouse, has a broad auger-like flange about 3 feet in diameter which, by turning, is bored into the sand, mud, or other soft bottom, to form a foundation with a broad bearing. On this, a weight of a columnar structure may



Courtesy of Fred Thomas

The Lighthouse in 1966 prior to moving.

be safely distributed and firmly fastened. The first lighthouse of this construction to be built in this country was that at Brandywine Shoal in Delaware Bay, completed in 1850. Shortly thereafter, several of these were built in the lower James River, Virginia.

Referring to the 1858 Lighthouse Report, I found reference to a Hooper's Strait light vessel in the channel between Hooper's and Goldsborough Islands and abreast of the entrance to Honga River. It was painted lead color, built in 1845, and carried a fixed light, 34 feet above sea level, and visible for 10 miles. The current Light List of the North Atlantic Coast states that the station there was established in 1827.

In the 1867 Report of the Lighthouse Board there is a note that 8 screw pile lighthouses were built, including one at Hooper's Straits. So this structure here today must be the second at that location.

In the 1880 Report there is an entry — "At the date of the last Annual Report the frame superstructure for the Hooper's Straits lighthouse was completed and ready for shipment to the site. The iron work was delivered to the site by the contractor in September, loaded on a hired schooner immediately upon its receipt, and together with the superstructure was transported to the site. The screwing down of the piles was commenced on September 21. The piles were placed in their position without any difficulty, the struts, tension bars, and sockets were fitted in place, and the wooden frame of the house was raised. The structure was ready for lighting early in October and on October 15, 1879, its light shone for the first time. The lighthouse is hexagonal in plan upon screw piles and shows a fixed light of the 5th order." This bears out an entry in the current light list stating that in 1879 the structure at Hooper's Straits was rebuilt.

Recorded in the 1882 Report there is a note that in accordance with the published notice to mariners, red rays were introduced in the lantern of this lighthouse. This was done by putting narrow panels of red glass inside the lantern panes in front of the light. The southern limits of the red rays from the lighthouse intersected at Bishops Head buoy with Clay Island and distinctly marked the shoal at that point, thus greatly aiding the navigation of Hooper's Straits and Tangier Sound. These glasses, or their replacements, can be seen in the light tower today.

In 1885 there was an unusual phenomenon that occurred around the Chesapeake. This was an earthquake which was reported by many

lighthouse keepers. The keeper of Hooper's Strait light turned in his reports indicating that at 9:55 P.M., on August 31, there was a shock that lasted about 1½ minutes. This was light but it set the window weights rattling. There was no other noise than a rumbling at the time, the weather clear with a moderate breeze.

Life was not always serene on these isolated lighthouses. If one had access to a complete set of Annual Reports of the Lighthouse Board I can assure you he would find some interesting accounts.

It was not unusual for severe ice floes to swing down the bay and rivers and carry the screw pile structures with them. This occurred to Smith Point on February 14, 1895. Temporarily that structure was replaced by a lightship but more permanently by a caisson-type lighthouse such as one sees at Bloody Point, not too far from here.

Fire was always a hazard. Twice the screw pile lighthouse at Thimble Shoal, in the lower bay, was destroyed by fire. The last time, on December 27, 1909, that structure was rammed by the four-masted schooner MALCOLM BAXTER, JR. in tow from the Virginia capes. The stove in the keeper's quarters was overturned igniting the oil used to illuminate the light. The wooden structure was a total loss and that too was replaced by a caisson-type lighthouse.

In March 1931 the beam of Holland Island Bar lighthouse failed to come on at the prescribed time. A party was sent out to investigate and found that the keeper was dead, probably murdered since a blood-stained butcher knife was found amid scenes of wildest confusion.

On many occasions the keepers of these lights took part in rescue operations of vessels and persons in distress near their stations.

These screw pile lighthouses did their jobs well but due to the increase of modern steam, gasoline, and diesel engine propelled vessels, and subsequent dredged channels for deep-draft craft far removed from the lighthouses, their importance as aids to navigation was lessened.

After World War II, a long range program was prepared for the gradual conversion of the screw pile structures to automatic, unattended status. Because of the excellent condition of the buildings and their easy identification during the daytime, the lighthouses were left intact when personnel was removed.

The selection of lighthouses to be converted to automatic was made from the Fifth Coast Guard District, Chesapeake Bay area, by a

board that evaluated the relative importance of each light station in respect to its need by navigation. In addition to the retention of the wooden superstructure on the screw piles as being easily identified in the daylight hours, economics also played an important role. Funds were limited during the first phase of the program preventing the removal of the houses. So the doors and windows were boarded up, the boat removed from the davit of each lighthouse selected, and the beacon continued to send out its beam through automatic operation. Hooper's Strait lighthouse went automatic on December 2, 1954.

In 1958 another District Board convened to make a further study of the need for retaining the remaining screw pile light stations. Experience in costly maintenance of the wooden superstructures indicated a policy of complete removal of same as each new conversion was accomplished.

A basic design was developed for each aid to be done by contract; removal of the wooden house and deck, replacement of all radial and perimeter beams by new steel I-beams, construction of a reinforced concrete deck and concrete block battery house, and erection on the house of a skeleton steel tower to permit the same focal plane or elevation of the light above mean high water as exhibited in the lanterns of the attended station since its establishment. A close inspection of the screw piles on all the structures indicated them to be in excellent condition despite their many years of service and they were retained as part of the basic design.

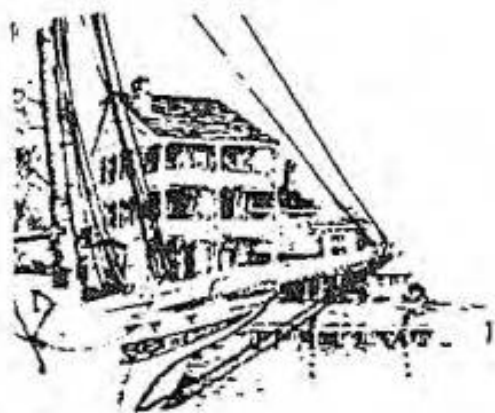
In 1962 the last of the manned screw pile structures was converted to automatic, with the exception of Thomas Point, mentioned earlier. Knowing the way automation has taken over in every field, it isn't hard to conceive that eventually even that structure will become unmanned and then follow others like her to oblivion. Today it seems that the single screw pile lighthouse with the best chances for survival is this from Hooper's Strait. The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum and its energetic staff and board have guaranteed that those not so fortunate to have seen these structures in their proper positions on the Chesapeake will at least be able to see this one here at St. Michaels.

I thank you.



Courtesy of Charles C. Harris

The Lighthouse as it is today.



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