Custom House

District of Portsmouth June 4. 1798

Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge your letter of the 29th Ult. respecting the erection of a Light House on the "Whales Back"; together with a printed advertisment for proposals, in which the form and dimensions of the proposed Light House are particularised. I have taken liberty to delay the publication of this advertisment, until I may receive your further instructions and beg to submit for your consideration a few observations with regard to the situation in which it is proposed to build, and the necessity of diviating from the usual form.—

The Whales Back, as it is called, is the hump of a ledge of rocks, at the entrance of this harbour, which is entirely covered at high water, and over which, when the wind is at any point between S.W. & N.E. the sea breaks with great violence. It is surrounded on all sides, except towards the main channel, by dangerous rocks, all covered at high, and many of them at low water.—

This rock derives its name from its form, having the appearance at half tide, of a whales back, as they usually shew themselves above water. It is distant from Wood Island, which is the nearest place to it, 420 yards. From this view you will perceive the difficulty, which will attend the erection of a Light House there, and the necessity of having a large and strong foundation. You will also observe, that it will be impossible to have a seperate dwelling house for the Keeper, on the same rock, and the expediency of making the lower part of the tower large enough to

accommodate him, at such times as he may be confined there, which in some seasons may be for weeks in succession, when it will be unsafe, if not impossible for him to leave— As there are many Light Houses in this vicinity, this should so far differ from them as to be easily distinguished; and as it is intended eventually to make it the principal Light for the harbour, it should be sufficiently large for that purpose. The Newcastle Light House (or as it is commonly called the Portsmouth Light) is too far within the points of danger for the main light, is directly in the way of, Fort Constitution; and if the contemplated improvements in that garrison are ever carried into effect, it will be enclosed within its walls— With a good light on the Whales back, a small harbour light on the walls of the Fort, or where the Light now is, will be all that is necessary. —There is another circumstance to which I would respectfully ask your attention. —

The amount of the appropriation under the most favorable circumstances, will be barely sufficient, if it should be found at all adequate to the object. The stone for building must all be transported on decked vessels and from a great distance. The contract cannot, probably, be made before the middle of July; and the time between that period and the first of November will be so short, for a work of this magnitude and difficulty, depending, as it will, so much on the weather, that a much larger sum will be required to accomplish it within that time than would be, if under special circumstances, it could be extended; beside, if it should be found practicable to accomplish the whole in the present year, the walls of the Light House, being the last to be built, would not have time to season

before they would be exposed to great injury from the frost.
To obviate these difficulties I would suggest the propriety
of making two contracts.— The first for the foundation, which
will be the most important and expensive, and to include with
it the dwelling House, as the Contractor could employ his men
upon it when the tide would prevent his working on the found
ation of the Light House; and he would in this way be enabled
to take it a lower price.—

The second Contract to be for the Light House to be completed
at some early period in the next year.—

By reason of the exposed situation in which this work is to be
carried on, it cannot be prosecuted, either with economy or
safety, to any considerable extent after the first of October.

With these views of the subject, I submit for your consid
eration a general outline of the plan I propose, marked A.—
and have enclosed with it a copy of an act of the State of
Maine, ceding the jurisdiction over the Whales Back and
Wood Island to the United States, marked B.—

With perfect Respect
I have the honor to be
Sir
Your Most Obt. Servt.

Wm. McKeown
Lieut

S. Pleasonton Esqr
Acting Commissioner of the Revenue
Washington.