ADDRESS
COMMISSIONER OF LIGHTHOUSES
AND REFER TO DATE OF THIS LETTER
AND FILE NO.

665E

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
BUREAU OF LIGHTHOUSES
WASHINGTON

November 19, 1931.

Memorandum:

The question of which was the first lighthouse established by the Federal Government has been raised a number of times, inquiries being received by persons interested in Cape Henry, Virginia, and Portland Head, Maine, as apparently rival claimants.

The following appears from the records with respect to these lighthouses:

Portland Head light-station, Me. (Established in 1791.)

Appropriated by act of Congress, "out of the moneys arising from the duties on imports and tonnage, a sum not exceeding $1,500, for the purpose of finishing the lt-ho. on Portland Head, in the district of Maine; and that the Secretary of the Treasury, under the directions of the President of the United States, be authorized to cause the said lt-ho. to be finished and completed accordingly." "Aug. 10, 1790, $1,500. (From history slip)

"A lighthouse on Portland Head, at the entrance to Portland Harbor, Maine, was undertaken by Massachusetts and ceded to the United States in 1790, and was completed in 1791 under appropriations made by Congress, which authorized the Secretary of the Treasury "to cause the said lighthouse to be finished."
(Putnam, Lighthouses and Lightships of the United States)
p. 28

Cape Henry light-station, Va. (Established in 1791. Rebuilt in 1881.)

Authorized by act of Congress, Mar. 26, 1790, $24,076.66. The first light-house erected by the General Government was that upon Cape Henry, in 1791. (From history slip).

"The lighthouse at Cape Henry at the entrance to Chesapeake Bay was the first one built by the United States, the work being included in the first appropriation made by Congress for lighthouse purposes, on March 26, 1790. The project had, however, been undertaken by Virginia. ---------- An octagonal sandstone tower was built, and the light shown in 1792."
(Putnam, Lighthouses and Lightships of the United States)
p. 20, 21

It will be noted that the history slips give Cape Henry as established in 1791, whereas the Commissioner's book says that the light was shown in 1792. These statements may be consistent on the assumption that the tower was substantially completed in 1791 although the light may not have been actually exhibited until 1792.

From the fact that an appropriation of only $1,500 was required to finish Portland Head Lighthouse, it appears that this lighthouse was very nearly completed at the time that it was ceded to the Federal Government; and although there is no clear evidence in the records that have been found as to whether it antedated Cape Henry, the inference that it did seems very plausible.

In answering inquiries from persons interested in these two lighthouses, it seems that the claims of both can be supported by using the following language: "Portland Head, Maine, was the first lighthouse to go into commission after the formation of the Federal Government." "Cape Henry, Virginia, was the first lighthouse constructed by the Federal Government."

The approp for Cape Henry was the earlier

W. P. HARMAN
Administrative Assistant.

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