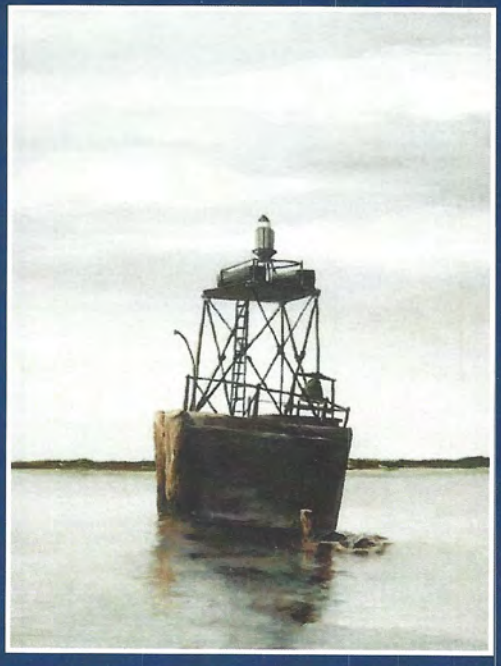
LIGHTING THE RIVER

Lamplighter kept the lights burning on the Rappahannock

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For early mariners coming and going on Chesapeake Bay, some of the first navigational aids that provided direction were bush markers and light ships. Bush markers were simply long, thin, sapling trees, cut by hand and shaved with a drawing knife, leaving leaves and branches at the top to give mariners something to see. These saplings were driven into the river bottom near the channel and used mostly at the entrances of creeks and coves. On major deep water shoals in the bay, light ships were positioned with open fire on deck to provide light. However, neither bush markers nor light ships were very reliable or accommodating to sailors. Early on in our nation's development, our forefathers realized the need for a reliable method of having and maintaining navigational aids on the bay.

In 1792, a relatively new United States government funded construction of the first lighthouse to illuminate the entrance of the bay at Cape Henry. Through the 1800s there was a flurry of construction of lighthouses throughout the bay region. Over 75 "residential lighthouses" were built in Virginia and Maryland waters. Often a keeper and an assistant keeper manned these lighthouses, and much has been documented concerning Chesapeake Bay lighthouses and their keepers. There is, however, a brief era in the bay history of navigational aids that is seldom ever mentioned.

It was the era of lamplighters. On the "middle" Rappahannock River, this era spanned from 1918 until 1967 when the U.S. Coast Guard established Milford Haven Coast Guard Station at Gwynn's Island and took over maintenance of all buoys on the river. Prior to that, the coast guard hired two men to maintain the buoys that were located between Parrots Creek near Water View up river to Port Royal.

Between them, Fred Garrett and his son Wit Garrett were the lamplighters of the Middle Rappahannock for 48 years. Today, Wit, 86, lives near Bowlers Wharf right next door to the house where he was born. He recalls with remarkable clarity the history surrounding those years.

Bowler's Light

Bowler's Rock Lighthouse was the only residential light built on the Rappahannock. Windmill and Stingray Lighhouses were at the entrance to the river in the bay. Bowler's Lighthouse was built in 1868 and lasted until 1918.

That year, Fred Garrett was in the oyster business at Bowler's and lived just up stream from the lighthouse. There was a winter freeze in 1917-18 and all of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries were frozen solid for 52 straight days.

Bowler's Rock Lighthouse was manned by an experienced lighthouse keeper by the name of John Spence. Spence had been assistant lighthouse keeper at Hog Island Light for several years, but more importantly, he was from Tangier Island and he grew up on the bay. He witnessed the Great Chesapeake Bay Freeze of 1897. He knew what damage ice, wind and tide could do to a structure like Bowler's Rock Light, and he knew the lighthouse structure might be in danger. Wit recalls his father telling him that as the ice thawed towards the end of the freeze, Spence anticipated the loss of the lighthouse so he detached the light itself from the structure, mounted it on a sleigh and pulled it ashore. "The light had a fluted lens that magnified the light and that's what he carried ashore," said Wit.

"The danger comes not during the freeze but when the ice starts to thaw," said Wit. "When five acres of ice, 5-inches thick breaks loose and starts moving, it will take away anything in its path. That's what happened to the lighthouse. The ice took it away."

A New Light

Lighthouse authorities under the United States Department of Commerce decided not to put the lighthouse back. Instead they installed a buoy light and hired Wit's father as the "lamplighter." His job was to keep the light and bell going. Shortly after this, the United States Coast Guard took over the responsibility of navigation aids and Fred went to work for them.

Wit's father took over maintaining the Bowler's light on September 1, 1918, several years before Wit was born. In the beginning, Fred Garrett maintained the light by rowing a skiff out to it. "Daddy told me that one time he got caught in a storm out in the river in a row boat between home and Bowler's Rock," said Wit. "The boat started taking on water and the only thing he had to bail with was his cap. He bailed the entire way with his hat and made it home."

After a while, the Coast Guard got him to maintain other lights on the river. The one at Jones's Point was a kerosene lantern that was set on the top of the buoy. "It was just like a regular kerosene lantern that he had to keep oil in and keep the wicks going," said Wit. "He literally lit the lamp. That light was three miles from here and he got there by rowing."

Wit was born in 1922, and after he got to be about 10 years old, he accompanied his father to work the lights. By then they were using a small power boat called the *Lindy* to come and go. "The light was a steel caisson, sunk to the bottom and filled with concrete," said Wit. "The concrete deck was 12-feet wide with two chambers and two hatches. One chamber held sedoline gas cylinders that fueled the light. The other chamber was filled with CO_2 cylinders that ran the bell.

"It had a wonderful old bell that weighed a thousand pounds," said Wit. "It had a striker under it and still had the bell when I took over. It was our job to keep the bell regulated and it sounded 24 hours a day during the fog season from October to April. We cut it off in the summertime.

"We had it set to ring day and night every 20 to 30 seconds," said Wit. "Sometimes it would get out of tune and there was an adjustment we would work on.



LIKE HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM, WIT GARRETT, 86, maintained the buoys on the Middle Rappahannock.



Wit and his wife Francis.

"When my children were little the bell was in operation and it left fond memories for them because they'd go to sleep at night hearing the sound of the bell," he said. "It was a nice sound and all the people on both sides of the river were crazy about the sound. Later, the coast guard took the bell out and put a fog horn on it and nobody liked that."

In the mid-1950s, Fred retired and Wit took over the job. He bought a 36-foot Deltaville deadrise wooden boat with a round pilot house named the *Margaret Frances* to come and go to the lights. By then batteries were being used to keep the lights going and Wit was in charge of about 15 lights between Water View and Port Royal. Wit had an aluminum boat on a trailer which he would haul up to Port Royal and put overboard to work the lights in that area. He used his deadrise boat for buoys that were closer to home.

"In the middle of the winter, I'd take two bow lines and tie the boat with both lines to the buoy," he said. "I was always afraid the boat would get loose and I'd be stuck on the buoy and freeze to death right there.

"Some winters we had fields of ice and I had a hard time getting to the buoys," he recalls. "When a field of ice was coming with the tide, and another field somewhere else, I had to be mighty careful to pick my way so I wouldn't be caught in between. When the ice fields would go by those lights, they would shake the entire platform and turn the batteries over. That was one of the worst things I had to contend with.

"One of the buoys up near Port Royal in close to shore had bats in it," said Wit. "I'd go up there and get ready to go to work and bats would be flying all around me. I didn't like that much.

"I enjoyed the work during warm weather," he said. "There is peace from just being out on the river alone. I didn't make much money. I think the most I ever got was $125 a month but I enjoyed it most of the time."

Wit said that he had established relationships with people in the areas of the buoys and had them call him when a buoy light went out. "They'd call and I'd be out there at first light. It wasn't a job I could do at night."

He had lights on both sides of the river and there were different types of lights in each creek. Some were single, blinking lights while others were "range lights." These were lights on two buoys, one buoy on one side of the channel and another on the other side. One buoy would blink fast while the other would blink slowly. The water between the two blinking lights was the channel.

"When a light went out it usually involved batteries," he said. "The battery was shaped just like an automobile battery. There was a little piece of tape on the top covering a hole that I'd take off and I'd fill the hole with water. That would usually take care of the problem, but if not, I had to replace the battery. Batteries would last about two months but I had to go check them every two weeks."

Wit also had to check light bulbs and a small electric motor that ran the flasher. "The flasher was either a quick flash or slow flash," he said. "There were four light bulbs, and if one blew out the light would roll over to the next bulb until all four blew, but seldom did all four blow before I would check it."

Wit said that today many of the lights are solar operated and are reliable enough that the lights do not have to be checked so often. Coast Guard buoy tenders now take care of maintaining the lights.

"In 1967, when I retired, I guess I felt about the same way John Spence felt when he lost his job in 1918 when ice took away the lighthouse," said Wit. "It was a part-time job that my daddy and I took very seriously," he said. "When I retired, an officer from the Coast Guard came to my house with a letter thanking me for a job well done." The letter is framed and hangs on Wit's wall at his home. "I'm proud of the job we did," he said. "My family has worked the water for generations so we knew how important it was for those lights to keep burning. It was an important job!" ■

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