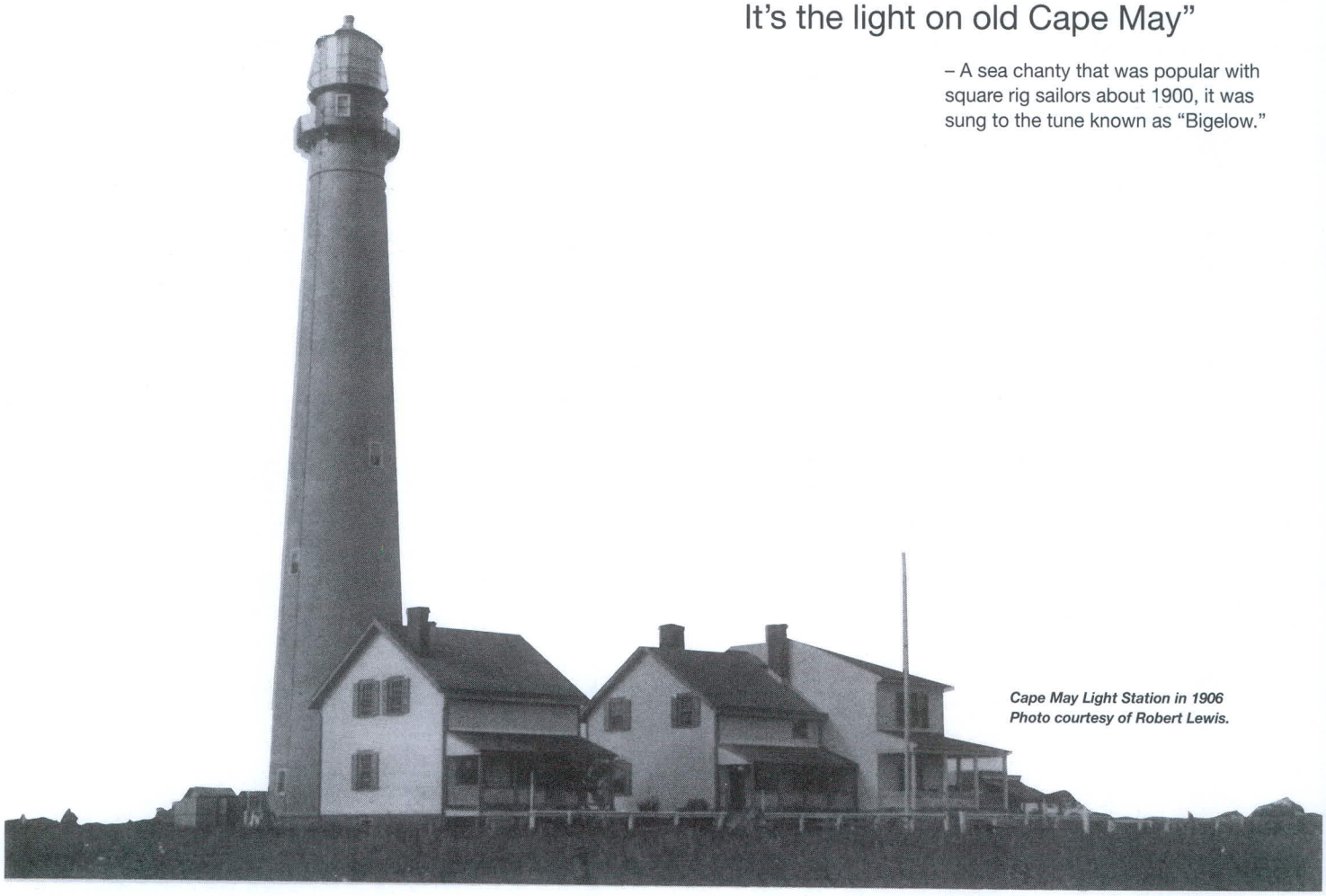
Cape May Lighthouse

By John Bailey

The Light on Old Cape May

The wind it blew from Sou' sou' east
It blew a pleasant breeze
And the man upon the lookout cried:
"A light upon our lee!"
They reported to the captain and
These words did he say—
"Cheer up my sailor lads,
It's the light on old Cape May"

– A sea chanty that was popular with square rig sailors about 1900, it was sung to the tune known as "Bigelow."



Cape May Light Station in 1906
Photo courtesy of Robert Lewis.

Could Cape May really have been dark until 1823? Recorded history tells us that it was. However, scattered clues point to an earlier light on this historically busy Cape:

Cape May at the southernmost tip of New Jersey, marks the northeast side of the entrance to Delaware Bay. The Cape's earliest settlers were bay pilots, ship builders, and whalers. Cape May's whaling industry in the 1680's rivaled that of Cape Cod's. And Delaware Bay has been one of the nation's busiest waterways since Colonial times. The Delaware's waters reach Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, seat of the first Continental Congress. Shipping bound from Europe, New York, and New England must navigate around Cape May to sight Cape Henlopen and to enter the Delaware Bay. Yet, the Pennsylvania Board of Port Wardens chose to build a lighthouse on Henlopen in 1765-1767 in lieu of Cape May. Why? Was some unknown beacon already marking the New Jersey Cape? The Wardens did purchase land for a lighthouse at Cape May on September 23, 1785, but so far no evidence has been found of a lighthouse around that date.

— An old map of the Delaware, dated 1744, shows a lighthouse marker on Cape May with the words "flash light."

— The July 1, 1801, edition of the Philadelphia Aurora and General Advertiser contains an advertisement for accommodations at a public house in Cape May, "in sight of the lighthouse."

— The geneology of the Hand family, an old Cape May family, has a Japhet Hand, ". . . born 1817 in a lighthouse at Cape May, N.J."

If earlier lights did flash from Cape May, no one knows of them. The Cape has hidden any trace of them in its eternally shifting sands.

It wasn't until May 7, 1822, that Congress appropriated $5,000 to "contract for the building of a lighthouse on Cape May." On July 15 of that year, the government paid Mr. and Mrs. John Stites $300 for one acre of Cape May's dunes. On March 3, 1823, Congress appropriated another $5,750 for "Completing the lighthouse on Cape May." The following October, the Cape's first known light, a revolving apparatus of 15 lamps backed with 16-inch diameter reflectors, flashed on. The focal plane of the light stood 88 feet above the sea upon a 68 foot brick tower. By 1847, just 24 years later, high tides surrounded the tower. The first known keeper of the Cape May lighthouse, Ezekial Stevens, discontinued the light on May 1, 1847. The Lighthouse List for 1849 states simply "Removed and rebuilt in 1847, 400 yards N.E. from old site."

On April 9, 1847, the government paid Alexander Whilden and his wife $1,150 for 2 acres of land, "be the same more or less," for the construction of a lighthouse. Local contractors, Samuel and Nathan Middleton, built a 78 foot high round brick lighthouse on the site, safely inland from the eroding shore line. The lantern contained a catoptric (mirrored or reflected light) device similar to the first optic. It consisted of 15 lamps with reflectors on three faces of a rotating frame, ten of them 15 inch parabolic reflectors, and five of them 14-inch spherical reflectors. The device revolved once every three minutes, flashing at all points once every minute. Cape May had a new lighthouse safely in place. However, distant events taking place in Washington would soon bring this tower down faster than the sea destroyed the earlier tower.

In 1851, after being bludgeoned by volleys of complaints, Congress appointed a board to investigate and inspect our nation's lighthouses. Cape May's inspection, dated June 25, 1851, reported the station to be in a sad state of repair. The tower, although only four-years-old, was described as "rough and rudely built," leaking, unpainted and rusty. The light revolved irregularly and lacked ventilation. Downes E. Foster, keeper, was untrained. He had no printed instructions, and he was in a low state of morale. He had a lack of basic supplies such as paint, trimming scissors, brooms, and brushes. The keeper's quarters had a leaking roof, cracked plaster and broken windows.

The result of the nation-wide investigation changed the Lighthouse Service forever. After reading the investigators' report, Congress immediately appointed a Lighthouse Board with the charge of totally reorganizing the system. Among other recommendations, the Lighthouse Board's proposal (dated January 30, 1852) called for upgrading nine important seacoast lights. "Second only in importance to the foregoing proposed new structures is the necessity for substituting first-order lens apparatus in place of the present inferior reflectors, and giving to each tower an elevation of not less than 150 feet, at the following points, where first-class sea-coast lights are indispensable to the safety of commerce." The nine sites included: Cape Lookout, Cape Fear, Cape Romain, Charleston, SC; and Cape May.

On March 3, 1857, Congress appropriated the monies "For rebuilding and fitting with first-order apparatus the lighthouse at Cape May entrance to the Delaware Bay."

It was at the time, the heyday of lighthouses. The Fifth Auditor's frugal administering of the lighthouse system had been a catastrophe. The Lighthouse Board, comprised of naval and coastal survey members were more attuned with the needs of mariners. Augustine Fresnel had perfected his lenses and Congress had ordered his first-order lens for all important seacoast lighthouses. In New Jersey, the government was already building two other magnificent towers: Absecon (1856-1857) and Barnegat (1857-1858).

It was in this environment that the Corps of Engineers arrived at Cape May to build the state-of-the-art sentinel that still guards the Northeast entrance to the Delaware Bay. The following is from a site description by the Fourth District Engineers, dated March 20, 1878: "The present tower and buildings were erected by mechanics and laborers employed and paid in part by the day and in part by the month; commenced under the direction of Captain (now Lieutenant Colonel) William F. Reynolds, continued by Captain W.B. Franklin, and finished by the late Major (Hartman) Bache, all of the

Corps of Engineers, U.S.A. Tower finished 1859; dwellings finished in 1860."

The Engineers removed the 1847 lighthouse in 1862, "having been found to be productive of danger, by misleading mariners by day." They saved approximately eight feet of the base, roofed it over, and used it for a storage barn. Its location was approximately 420 feet from the present tower, toward the ocean, just beyond the present water line.

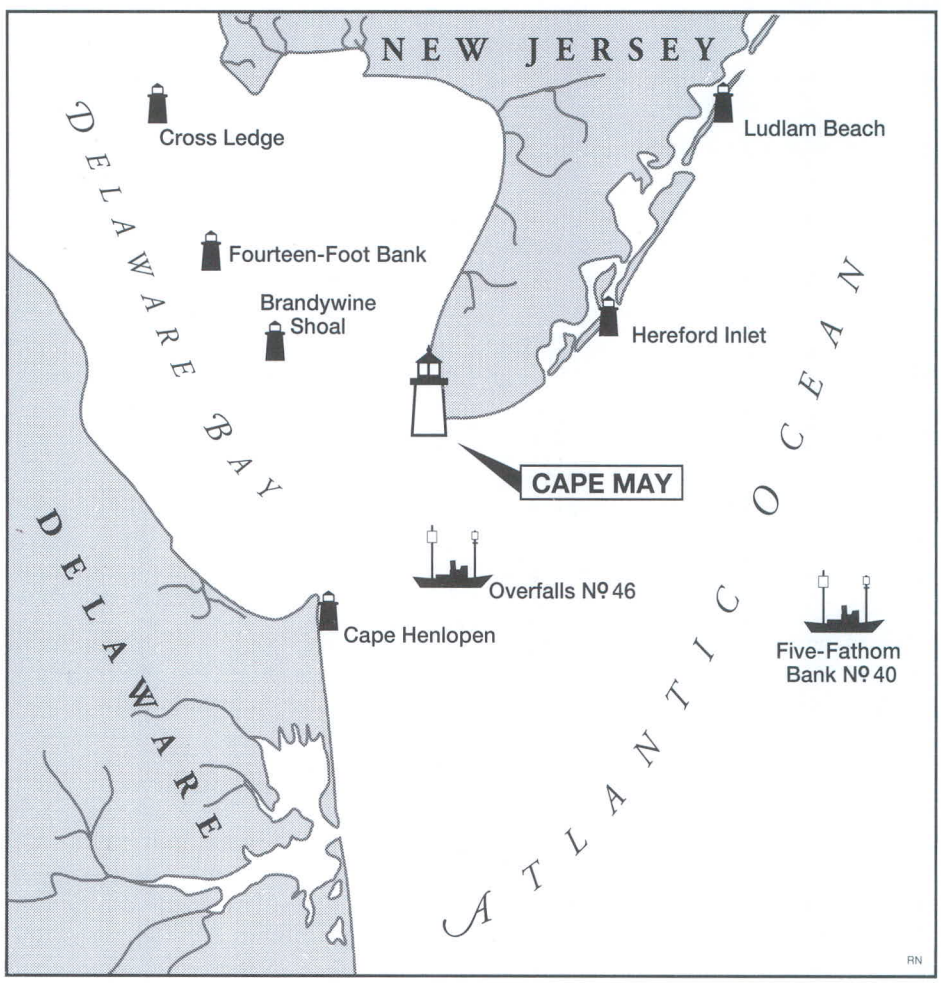
The Cape May Lighthouse soars 157 feet, 6 inches from the ground to the ventilator ball on top of its red lantern.

Keeper William C. Gregory climbed its 199 step spiral stairway and lighted the lamp for the first time at sunset on October 31, 1859. Today, since it is still an active aid to navigation, many consider the Cape May Lighthouse to be the second oldest continually operating lighthouse in the country, after another New Jersey lighthouse, Sandy Hook, built almost a century before in 1764.

The lantern stands 12 feet 6 inches tall and has 16 sides, and is approximately 12 feet in diameter. Henry LaPaute of Paris built the revolving 16 flash panel Fresnel Lens for the lantern. The lens revolved once every eight minutes around a Funck first-order, five-wick, hydraulic float lamp, producing a 2-second flash at all points every 30 seconds. A clockwork weight system, with a 28 foot long drop tube between the walls, drove the lens for eight hours on a winding. The lens now reposes, on permanent loan, at the Cape May County Historical and Genealogical Museum.



The brick oil house was constructed in 1893 after the station changed from lard oil to kerosene. The peaked roof is an unusual design for an oil house. The Mid Atlantic Center for the Arts restored this structure in 1990. It now houses the lighthouse orientation center and museum shop. Photo courtesy of MAC.



In 1893, the Lighthouse Service built the brick oil house. Presumably, they converted the lamps to mineral oil at that time. However, it wasn't until 1902 that an incandescent oil vapor lamp flashed from Cape May's lantern.

Although electricity was extensively in use on the Cape in the 1920's, the Cape May beacon had to wait until 1933 for its first electric light bulb. Ada Palmer, daughter of the last keeper, Harry Palmer, remembers the new electric light as visibly dimmer than the old oil vapor lamp. On September 27, 1934,



Above–Cape May Light Station shortly after the 3rd Assistant Keeper's quarters (far right structure) was built onto the side of the 1st Assistant Keeper's quarters. The 1902 addition ignores the architectural symmetry of the site. The wooden water tower, at left, stored water for the borough of Cape May Point. Photo taken from an old Post Card and courtesy of the Mid Atlantic Center for the Arts.



Eventually the original 1st Assistant Keeper's quarters, left side of the duplex in top photo, was removed and a new half of the duplex was constructed to match the "new" 2nd Assistant Keeper's house. National Archives photo.

an experimental sodium vapor light, the first ever to be used in a lighthouse, changed the Cape May light from white to yellow. Evidently the sodium vapor bulbs weren't very dependable. The Superintendent of Lighthouses, N.C. Manyon, wrote a letter to Mrs. Palmer, dated November 1, 1935, pleading with her to stay on as custodian after her husband had suffered a debilitating heart attack. In the letter, Manyon promised, "For your information, it can be stated that on December 30th, the light will be changed to reduce the possibilities of extinguishment, and if this would make conditions so that you could continue on as custodian, I should be very pleased to have you reconsider the matter." Apparently Florence Arabelle Palmer was not convinced, as the Palmers departed in December.

On September 14, 1859, Assistant Keeper's Samuel Stilwell (1st) and John Reeves (2nd) joined William Gregory as the full complement of keepers for the nearly completed tower. This was the first time more than one keeper had tended this station, and from that date on, until the Palmers departed, three keepers and their families lived here. However, for some reason, the government, in its infinite wisdom, built only two dwellings. The Assistant keepers' families had to crowd into one house. Apparently, this situation caused considerable distress, as every Lighthouse Board Inspection Report since 1880 contained increasingly urgent pleas for a third dwelling. For 22 years Congress ignored the Board's recommendations while the Assistant keepers and their wives shared the same kitchen every day.

In 1902, Congress finally relented and appropriated the money for a third dwelling at Cape May. The builders constructed the house as an addition to the original cottage on the right (as you face the tower) turning it into a duplex. How any committee or person could have decided on the design for the addition is baffling. The attached dwelling had not the slightest resemblance or conformance to its foundation mate; but, instead, looked like half of a completely different style of the addi-

tion. This reconstruction destroyed the symmetry of the site as initially designed. In 1968, an unknow arsonist burned the duplex to the ground. After the loss, the State housed a park ranger and family in the remaining keeper's cottage.

On June 15, 1973, the State placed the Cape May Lighthouse on the New Jersey Registry of Historic Places; later that year, on November 12, the National Park Service placed the structure on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1986, the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts (MAC), subleased the lighthouse from the State of New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Parks and Forestry, who in turn leased the lighthouse from the Coast Guard. Under this complicated lease arrangement, MAC is restoring this historic structure and has opened it to the public. As with all projects of this nature, finding adequate funding has been the major obstacle. Further, MAC's lease arrangement, with the Coast Guard as the final owner, made MAC ineligible for New Jersey Historic Trust grants. However, the Coast Guard, under Congressional mandate, recently transferred ownership of the lighthouse to the State of New Jersey. So, the immediate future is looking bright.

Unfortunately, the long term may not be so bright. The waves washing up on the sands of the Cape May Point beach are rapidly erroding the shore line of the entire Cape. Will the pounding surf overtake this tower as it has her sisters? The answer lies hidden in the unfolding future of the Cape May Lighthouse and the forces of nature.



Above–Harry Palmer as a young Assistant Keeper, prior to his arrival at Cape May, in 1924, as principal keeper. Harry was the last resident keeper of the Cape May Light Station. Photo courtesy of the Palmer family.



Right–The Cape May, Delaware Bay & Sewells Point Railroad Co. trolley at the lighthouse station circa 1902. The company issued free passes to officials and employees of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. The railway ferried the keepers and their families between the lighthouse and Cape May City. The location of the tracks is now underwater, 150 feet beyond the present shore line. MAC photo.