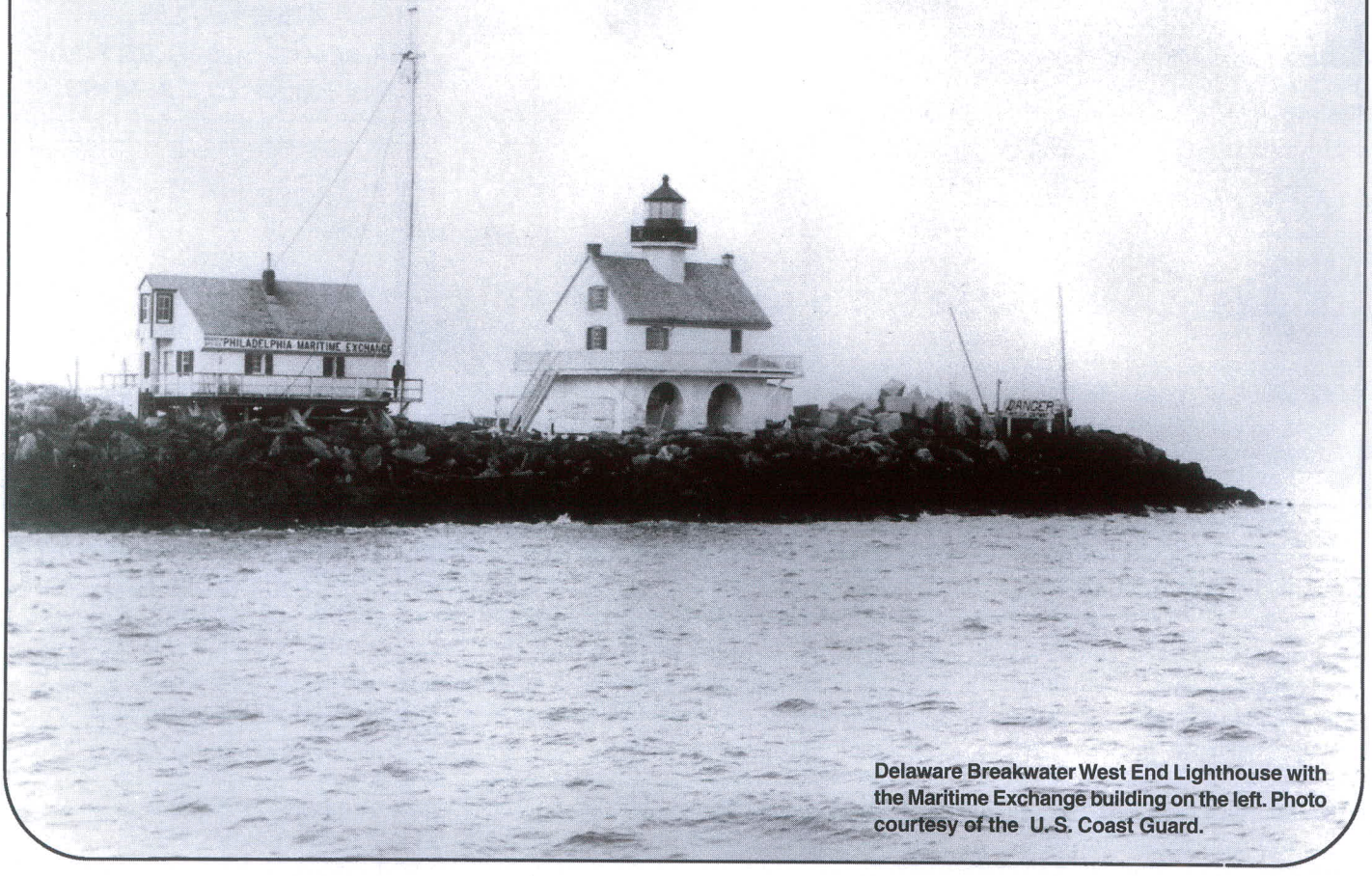


Delaware Breakwater West End Light Station

By Bob Trapani, Jr.



Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse with the Maritime Exchange building on the left. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Not many people today are aware of the fact that in addition to the existing Delaware Breakwater East End Lighthouse, the Delaware Breakwater, or inner stone wall in Lewes Harbor, was home to another beacon of the sea. In fact, this forgotten lighthouse—known as the Delaware Breakwater West End Light Station—actually preceded the east end light and stood sentinel around the midway point of the breakwater wall.

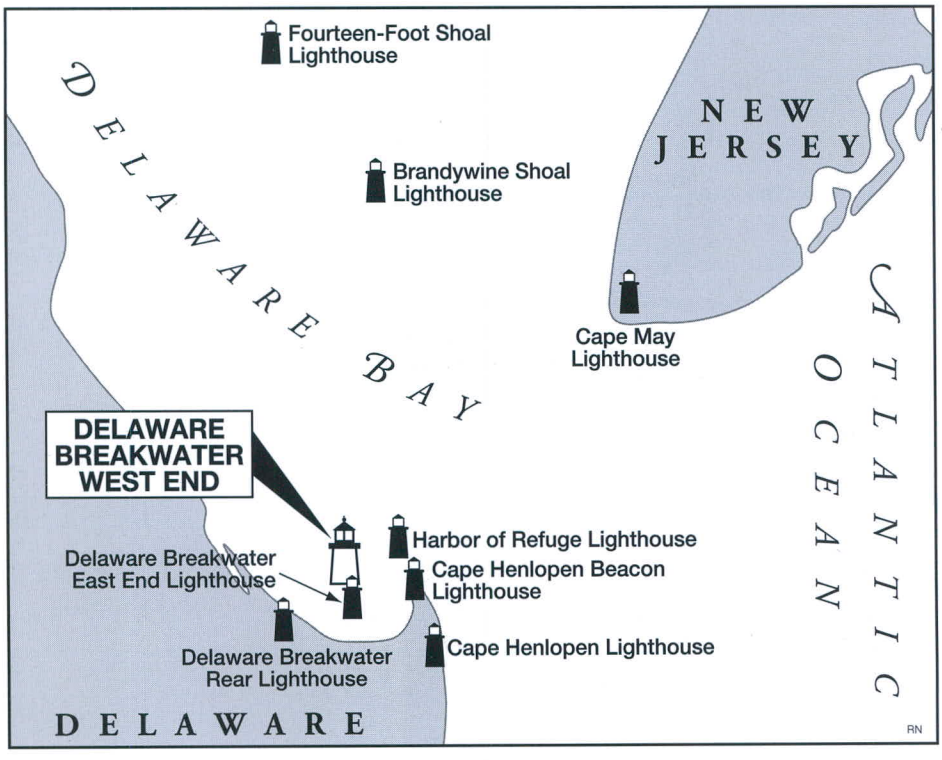
The beginnings of the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse are inseparably connected to the construction of the Delaware Breakwater itself. On May 23, 1828, President John Quincy Adams approved an appropriation of $250,000 for the construction of the breakwater and one year later, in 1829, the first stones were being set in the waters of Lewes Harbor.

The construction of the breakwater occurred under the watchful eye of renowned engineer William Strickland. The project took forty years, and by 1869 the cost of the breakwater's construction had cost the United States $2,123,000 and spanned the terms of twelve presidents. When completed, William Strickland had overseen the placement of 835,000 tons of stone to build the breakwater, which stretched 2,586 feet. The original goal of 3,600 feet was not achieved. The icebreaker portion of the wall also fell short of the proposed 1,500-foot section by 99 feet. Author of *Cape Henlopen Lighthouse and Delaware Breakwater* John Beach states, "Despite these short comings it was still the second greatest structure of its kind in the world." The only breakwater that was larger at the time was located in Cherbourg, France.



An engraving from *Harper's Monthly* showing the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse.

Today the Delaware Breakwater is one complete structure that extends approximately 0.8-mile in length, but this was not always the case. Until 1882 a gap existed between the breakwater and the icebreaker, which ships seeking a harbor of refuge passed through during stormy weather or rough seas. To mark the opening between the stone structures, a powerful beacon light was established, and a decade later a lighthouse was built.



The Delaware Breakwater proved to be a lifesaver to vessels and their crews. During the Civil War, twenty-five ships made use of the harbor each day, while as many as two hundred sailing vessels could be found behind the wall during storms. The Delaware Breakwater also provided sailing ships—both American and international—the only harbor of refuge between Sandy Hook, NJ, and Cape Charles, VA.

Navigational light lists during the tenure of Delaware Breakwater West End Light record that the first lighthouse was built in 1849, though other sources indicate that a sentinel or beacon light existed as far back as 1838. An 1838 inspection report made by Lieutenant William D. Porter after a visit to the light at Delaware Breakwater stated, "Breakwater Beacon-Light…On superintendent's dwelling; has four lamps upon a different construction from those used in our lighthouses generally, and show a more brilliant light than any that I have seen in this district. Well kept." The inspection report went on to recommend that a fog bell be established at the light station to help vessels find their way safely into the harbor during thick fog.

The fact that Lieutenant Porter was sent to inspect the light at Delaware Breakwater

indicates that the federal government considered the beacon as part of the district's aids to navigation system. The reason for the "more brilliant light" over any others in the district is a bit of a mystery. Lighthouse records state that though the Fresnel lens was indeed invented by this time, the United States did not purchase or install the first French-made classical lens in an American lighthouse until 1841, when the Navesink Lighthouse in New Jersey received a first order lens. It remains quite intriguing that Lieutenant Porter was so impressed by the brilliance of the light at Delaware Breakwater.

Though the 1838 lens type is unknown, lighthouse historian Jim Gowdy provides an explanation on the confusion surrounding the construction date of the lighthouse. Gowdy comments, "The discrepancy of the two dates, 1838 and 1849, has to do with lights being exhibited from two different structures. The light in 1838 was said to be a small light on the superintendent's dwelling, and apparently, until a proper lighthouse was built by the Lighthouse Service in 1849, some reimbursements were made to the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and the Philadelphia Board of Underwriters, for maintaining the light on the Delaware Breakwater."

The man in charge of overseeing the construction of the Delaware Breakwater also served as the engineer for the construction of the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse in 1849. Given this fact, the lighthouse became known locally as the Strickland Light in honor of its builder William Strickland. When completed, the lighthouse was forty-three-feet tall from its base to the focal plane and had a forty-seven-foot focal plane from sea level. The beacon showed a fixed red light varied by flashes at intervals every forty-five seconds and by 1853 was outfitted with a fog bell.

A December 20, 1850 letter from The Secretary of the Treasury transmitting the report of the general superintendent of the Lighthouse Establishment sheds more light on the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse. The report states, "This is a new stone building, with the lantern on the roof. The building is raised on stone arches, laid in mortar or cement—supposed sufficiently high to be out of danger from the sea; appears a strong building, and a fair piece of work, although somewhat leaky in the roof about the lantern."

On May 1, 1876, the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse received a new fourth order illuminating apparatus designed to



Above – The former Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse, with the lantern removed, converted to accommodate the operations of the Maritime Exchange. The Maritme Exchange was an organization formed in 1875 which reported the ships entering Delaware Bay to the owners upriver. This enabled the owners to make preparations to berth and unload the ship.

Below – A view from the back (or harbor side) of the former Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse after its appearance was altered to accommodate the operations of the Maritime Exchange. Both photos courtesy of the Maritime Exchange.



increase the brilliancy of the light for the "benefit to commerce." The new optic was to show a fixed light, varied by white flashes every minute and could be seen a maximum of twelve nautical miles. In addition, the station's fog bell struck at intervals of ten seconds to help warn mariners of dangers obscured by thick weather. Another aid to mariners was the color scheme of a lighthouse, which in the case of Delaware Breakwater West End Light was whitewashed brick with a black lantern.

A new chapter in the history of the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse unfolded on November 1, 1881, when the U. S. Lighthouse Service created the Delaware Breakwater Range. Though much discussion and planning no doubt went into the decision to create a range at Delaware Breakwater, U. S. Lighthouse Service records do not shed much light on the thought process. The only reason cited was that the range was established to guide vessels safely into Delaware Bay. The rear light for the Delaware Breakwater Range was located on land at the end of Pilottown Road in Lewes.

The 1890 Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board records the fact that the great storm of September 1889 carried away the Delaware Breakwater West End Light's fog bell and machinery, including the frame tower that was designed to provide the apparatus with some protection from the elements. The report also states that the light station's outbuildings were washed away, as well as the plank walks and landing steps. Following the storm, the United States Lighthouse Service decided against replacing the fog bell at Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse, citing the fact that "the steam-signal at the east end of the breakwater was deemed sufficient."

As far back as 1842, Major Hartman Bache of the U. S. Navy Topographical Engineers lamented the fact that the new harbor of refuge created by the Delaware Breakwater was already too shallow for the navy's largest warships. One of the primary reasons was the gap that existed in between the breakwater and the icebreaker structures. It seems that violent tidal action caused extensive shoaling inside the safe harbor, thus reducing its ability to safeguard deeper draft vessels. It took forty years for Congress to act on Major Bache's observation, but by 1882 the federal government allocated the necessary funds to close the gap at Delaware Breakwater. The work began that same year and continued for sixteen years before the desired goal of connecting the two stone structures was accomplished in 1898.

Though the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse continued to serve as the front light in the Delaware Breakwater Range, the days of the lighthouse remaining as an active aid to navigation were numbered following the gap's closure in 1898. The light's inevitable decommissioning occurred on May 25, 1903, when the United States Lighthouse Service ordered the beacon darkened. The Delaware Breakwater Range continued to serve mariners, but the duties of the front light were transferred from the west end light to the nearby Delaware Breakwater East End Lighthouse.

This would seem to have been the end for the Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse, but another role related to navigation would immediately surface for the timeworn beacon. The Maritime Exchange for the Delaware River and Bay, which operated in a building next to the decommissioned lighthouse since 1875, requested and obtained permission from the U.S. Lighthouse Service to occupy the vacant structure. The Maritime Exchange utilized the old lighthouse until about 1942, when their operations were relocated to land at the tip of Cape Henlopen.

Once the Maritime Exchange removed itself altogether from the former lighthouse in 1954, the historic sentinel sadly began what would be its final journey into the pages of time over the next five years. Slowly but surely, the building suffered major deterioration from being vacant, as the elements and vandals exacted their unforgiving toll.

The exact date of the light's destruction is unknown, but retired Coastguardsman and local Lewes resident Warren Walls believes the light was razed and demolished for safety reasons in 1959 or 1960. Though uncertain of the year, Mr. Walls remembers serving as the coxswain for the boat that took a Coast Guard crew out to the light for the purpose of removing the hazard presented by the badly deteriorated structure. Today, only the brick foundation remains discernable atop the breakwater—a permanent tombstone of sorts that marks the site of the lost Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse... and it was Only Yesterday.



Brick remains of the light's foundation are all that remain today of the bygone Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse. Photo by Bob Trapani, Jr.

This historical account of Delaware Breakwater West End Lighthouse is excerpted from the author's latest book entitled, *Delaware Lights: A History of Lighthouses in the First State*, which was published by The History Press in South Carolina. To obtain a copy of this book, contact The History Press at: (866) 223-5778 or visit <www.historypress.net>.