Execution Rocks Lighthouse

By Wayne Wheeler

Several legends surround a low-lying reef at the eastern end of Long Island Sound. Exposed at low water, the reef is not visible during periods of high water. Over the years, early settlers to the area said that local Indians tied their enemies to the rocks at low tide, drowning them when the tide came in. The same story was repeated in later years, only with the British chaining captured colonialists to the rocks during the American Revolution. Of course, the tales have never been substantiated.

Although captured enemies may never have been put to death on the Execution Rocks, many sailors have perished after their vessel struck the reef. Early editions of Blunt's *American Coast Pilot* warned of the reef, and local sailors were always cautious when in the vicinity.

Execution Rocks are located at the eastern end of Long Island Sound about 1,500 yards north of the Sands Point Light Station on Long Island. That station's beacon assisted mariners in avoiding the dangerous reef. But during periods of reduced visibility, without the use of the Sands Point aid, mariners often found themselves afoul of the rocks.

A congressional appropriation on March 3, 1837, was approved for $5,000 to establish, "a revolving or double light upon the south side of Execution Rocks opposite Sands Point in Long Island Sound." However, for some reason, no action was taken.

In 1838 Lieutenant George M. Bach, USN was dispatched to inspect our aids to navigation system in the northeastern area and make recommendations. His report filed on November 22, 1838, recommended, among other things:

A light-house or light-boat on Execution Rocks, Long Island Sound, the eastern extremity of the reef bearing from Sands Point Light N. 21 degrees west, distant three quarters of a mile; and are passed by the majority of the vessels engaged in the extensive trade through the sound. In clear weather the light upon Sands Point is an excellent guide for the southern channel, but it cannot be depended on when the weather is thick and boisterous; and to those passing to the northward of the reef, it affords of little assistance at any time. On this account a light and bell on the reef would contribute greatly to the safety of navigation. Both a light and a light-boat have, at different times, been suggested for this purpose; but the establishment of the former appears the most advisable, from the following considerations:

1st - A lighthouse will accommodate a more perfect lighting apparatus and, consequently, a more brilliant light from it than from a light-boat.

2nd - From its not being liable to change of position, vessels can run for it with greater confidence than for a light-boat.

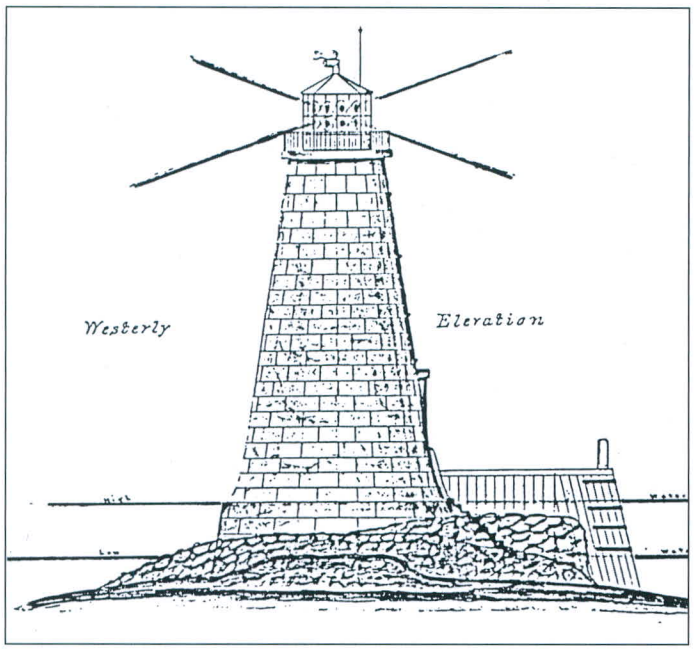
3rd - From being placed on the reef it will be a better guide for both passages around the rocks than a light-boat anchored near the shoal.

4th - It will prove more economical in a series of years, for assuming the cost of a substantial building to be $40,000, annual repairs $500. Maintenance of the light and salaries of the keeper and assistant $1,500; and the cost of a light-boat, which is required to be renewed every five years, to be $10,000, maintenance of the light and captain and crew $2,600 per annum; and allowing interest on the difference of the appropriations for the two objects, in a period of twenty five years there will have been expended for the light-house the sum of $102,500; for the light-boat $115,000, leaving a balance of $12,500 in favor of the former; and when at the end of this time it will be necessary to renew the boat, the tower will still be standing....

The chart [Bache included with his report] shows the result of the examination of the reef and shoal; the rocks to the eastward are masses of gneiss, having indication of being part of a continuous ledge, while those on the westward are small detached fragments...As there is every indication of a site for a secure foundation being obtainable, I would respectfully recommend that the establishment of a light-house be



An early undated photo of the Exection Rocks Lighthouse. USLHS archive photo.



Western elevation of the Execution Rocks Lighthouse. USLHS archives.

> authorized, and on account of being most serviceable to vessels approaching from the eastward, would suggest the eastern most extremity of the reef for its position...the exact site should be determined by an engineer.

This report was part of Bache's survey of northeast aids to navigation. It was required by Congress due to the numerous complaints that Congress had received over the years from our mariners. At the time, Stephen Pleasonton, fifth auditor of the Treasury, had been in charge for 18 years. He relied heavily on the opinions of Winslow Lewis who had been furnishing lighthouse supplies and constructing lighthouses for the government since 1812. Perhaps this is the reason that a lighthouse was not constructed on Execution Rocks until 1847, after several more congressional investigations about our system were conducted.

There is a story that one of the Blunt brothers (publishers of the *Coast Pilot*) was frustrated that nothing was being done about constructing a lighthouse on Execution Rocks. Since the federal government was not acting, one of the Blunts took a steamer to Albany to get a state bill passed to erect the lighthouse. The trip proved unsuccessful.

On the return trip by sloop from a Connecticut port across Long Island Sound, a very heavy storm came up while Blunt and the legislators were aboard. Blunt went to the captain and told him, "Now is our chance to get a bill through the legislature. I'll get the delegation to play Whist [early forerunner of bridge] and when we get near Execution Rocks you come and call me out from the game on several occasions. By the time we get home the bill will be signed."

During the game, the captain went to the door of the gaming room and said, "Mr. Blunt will you step out here please?" After a few minutes Blunt returned and resumed the game, saying nothing. A few minutes later the captain returned and asked Blunt to step out onto the companionway again. Again he returned and started playing again without saying a word. Finally, after being called out a third time, Blunt returned to the game and was greeted by the worried looks from the politicians. Blunt said, "Gentlemen we are about on Execution Rocks and the captain isn't sure of our position, we may all go down to Davy Jones Locker. Because you gentlemen wouldn't sign the bill we have to take our chances as the other poor devils have in the past."

They all signed the bill. But rather than a bill, the politicians probably petitioned Washington to construct the lighthouse.

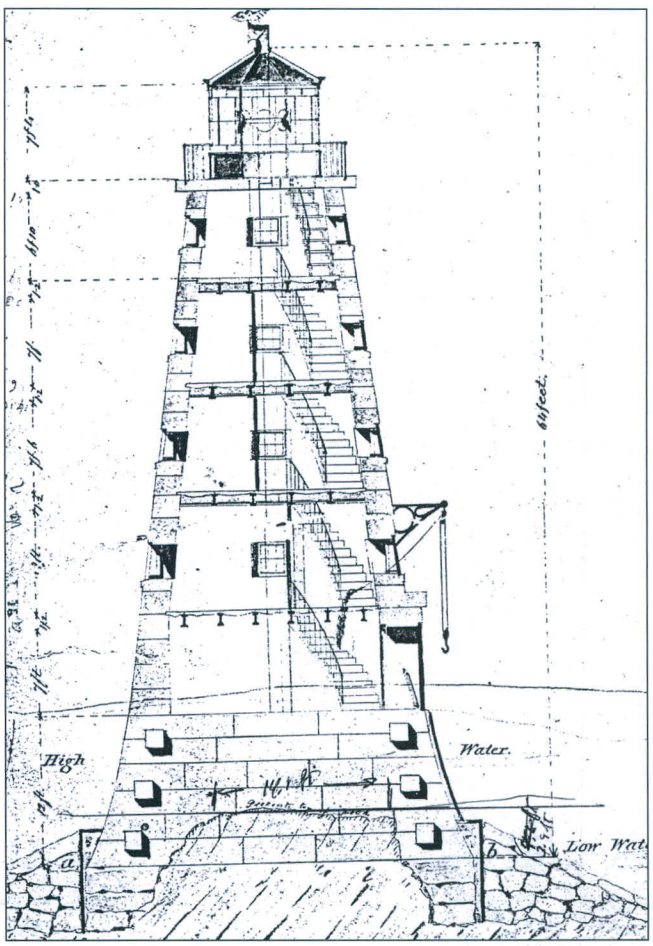
In 1847, ten years after Congress initially authorized some funds, $25,000 was appropriated, "for a light-house on Execution Rocks, Long Island Sound."

Two very different plans were proposed for the station. One was an iron-plate structure situated on piles. The other was a masonry structure designed by Alexander Parris, a Boston engineer who designed a masonry lighthouse for the entrance to the Mississippi River; the lighthouse turned out to be far too heavy for the soil in that region.

Parris surveyed the area, but the site he chose was rejected by local mariners who wanted a different site.

Pleasonton next asked the local collector of customs, in charge of lighthouses in that area, to ask for the opinion of local captains and pilots who, Pleasonton wrote, "fixed upon a place different from all others who had expressed an opinion on the subject, in water seven feet deep at low tide." He relayed the site to Parris who agreed that a lighthouse could be erected at that site, but that it would cost $50,000, about five times his original design and site. Pleasonton caved in, and the lighthouse was erected at the location Parris had originally selected.

The original winner of the contract, the low bidder, was eventually denied the contract as an examination of his background revealed that he did not have the skill, experience, or organization to



Cross-section of the lighthouse. USLHS archives.

properly complete the lighthouse. It was eventually cobbled together with a series of subcontractors, and it was completed a year late.

The lighthouse was finished in May 1849. To distinguish it from the nearby fixed white light at the Sands Point Light Station, Execution Rocks received a red light produced by 13 lamps and reflectors; Sand Point was refitted with a revolving white light. The station was also fitted out with a small bell fog signal.

Strangely enough, the new lighthouse had no dwelling associated with the tower. To man the lighthouse, Daniel Caukins of the Sands Point Light Station was given the responsibility for both lights. He appointed two assistants. One remained at the Execution Rocks station with his wife, although there were really no accommodations. The other assistant is reported only to be a furnisher of supplies, but he probably spelled the primary keeper. This arrangement continued until April 1, 1851, when William Craft was appointed head keeper of the Execution Rocks station.

In the *Annual Report* of the Lighthouse Board in 1855, it was reported:

> The foundation is insecure. The stones (riprap) thrown to the eastward of the tower to protect it from the heavy gales from that quarter have been washed to the west side, and the vessel filled with the same stones is breaking up. The landing wants repairs, as does the gallery around the outside of the tower, and the plastering inside. I would recommend that the whole be attended to at the earliest moment possible, and at the same time, a larger bell, with suitable striking machinery, be substituted for that now in use, which is much too small, and can be heard but a very short distance.

From the beginning, the Execution Rocks Lighthouse suffered from the elements. Located at the western end of Long Island Sound, it was constantly buffeted by storms, occasional floes of ice, and heavy seas. The Lighthouse Service was continually having to reinforce the riprap that protected the structure.

In 1856 the Lighthouse Board, continuing its modernization program, installed a fourth-order Fresnel lens and strengthened the foundation protection. Repairs were made in 1858 and 1862.

In 1867 the Lighthouse Service decided it was time to provide a suitable dwelling for the keeper and his family. The *Annual Report* stated, "The protecting pier on which the keeper's dwelling is to be built, is nearly finished. The work on the house will be carried on as long as the weather permits." The next year the dwelling was completed, the tower was refurbished with a new-style lantern, and the tower was connected to the dwelling by short passageway. Stephen Miller, who was keeper during the construction, was replaced by Keeper William Williams and his wife, Jane. The Lighthouse Service announced that the bell fog signal would be replaced by a trumpet powered by a hot air engine.

In 1869 the new fog trumpet was installed. Also that year, it was necessary to beef up the stone protection of the dwelling. The district reported, "The enrockment [*sic*] made there many years ago having settled considerably, it does not afford adequate protection to the tower and keepers dwelling, especially during severe storms of winter and the heavy pack ice brought against it by the tides. It is proposed to further protect the site and building by laying large blocks of granite." Completed the following year, the protection was starting to fail by 1877 and repaired the following year.

The third-class trumpet fog signal was replaced by a first-class trumpet in 1880.

In 1899 the present brown stripe was added to the white tower.

Over the years, the Lighthouse Service had to continually monitor the station, constantly replacing riprap and making repairs to the tower and dwelling. In 1901 there were 400 tons of riprap added and another 200 tons in 1902. In 1905 the fog signal was changed from a trumpet to an air siren.

In 1918 tragedy struck the station. One morning Keeper Peter Forget energized the station fog signal at 7 a.m. At noon he left his watch in the tower and went to the station kitchen to prepare lunch. While there he noticed the station engine (which provided all the power) was beginning to slow down. He went to the engine room and when he opened the door was met by a wall of fire.

He reported the fire to the local police headquarters which relayed it to the Lighthouse District office on Staten Island. The city fireboat, *Cornelius Lawrence*, was dispatched. Before the fire boat arrived, Keeper Forget and his two assistants fought the fire with water buckets and fire extinguishers. They were joined by some soldiers from Ft. Slocum, who arrived via rowboat and Navy patrol boats. Risking their lives, the men removed barrels of kerosene from a storage shed next to the burning fog signal building. Finally, at 2 p.m. the fire boat arrived and soon the fire was brought under control. Amazingly, although scorched, the lighthouse was saved. The fog signal building had to be completely refurbished.

In 1979 the Execution Rocks station was automated and the fourth-order Fresnel lens removed. A modern plastic optic now directs mariners around the reef as they navigate into the East River from Long Island Sound.



Execution Rocks Lighthouse with its familiar stripe. USLHS archive photo.