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The Lighthouses Act of 1789

The year was 1789, and the First Congress of the newly-formed United States of America was assembled in Federal Hall in New York City, the nation's capital at the time. The foremost thinkers and politicians were facing an important challenge: The establishment of a "Federal System of Lighthouses, Beacons, Buoys and Public Piers" and the commissioning of the first Federal Lighthouse near the entrance to Chesapeake Bay. A monumental commitment to providing safe, navigable waterways for the expanding maritime commerce of a sovereign country! James Madison himself put his considerable influence behind the initial proposal (HR-12) and proposed that tonnage duties be used to finance the ambitious plans. Even at this early time, North and South had different perspectives on the issue: Northern ports, with often-difficult harbor entrances, had to rely heavily on navigational aids, while Southern harbors were generally easier to approach and had fewer considerations for shipbuilding and merchant constituents. In addition and not surprisingly, the now-familiar dispute of State Rights vs. the role of the Federal Government was of major concern and had to be addressed.

After much back-and-forth between the House and the Senate, both brand new political institutions, an agreement was reached in the evening of August 6, and President George Washington signed the Act into law on the following day. Within the year, the Federal Government took over State-owned aids to navigation, and this system has remained in place since then. Today the system is maintained by the US Coast Guard as the responsible Federal Agency. *Thanks, Coast Guard!*

Legislation to declare August 7 the National Lighthouse Day was introduced to Congress in the spring of 1988 and signed by President Ronald Reagan on November 5, nearly 200 years after the events in New York. In his recognition speech Rep. William Hughes (NJ), sponsor of the House Bill, reminded the American people of the significance of these historic structures, their cultural relevance and the need to establish strong public-private partnerships to protect, restore and interpret our nation's maritime heritage. As of today there are still about 680 lighthouses remaining in the United States. The Boston Lighthouse on Little Brewster Island is the oldest lighthouse, built in 1716 and heavily damaged during the American Revolutionary War. The oldest original lighthouse in the US is the Sandy Hook Lighthouse in New Jersey. It was built in 1764 and is still showing its light today.

Time does not stand still, and the maintenance of these sometimes very remote structures has been an ever-growing financial burden on federal budgets. At the same time, with the advent of GPS, the navigational significance of the lighthouses is shrinking. In the year 2000 the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act created a new arrangement for the transfer of federally-owned lighthouses into private hands. Through a multiple step process involving the US Coast Guard, the General Services Administration (GSA) and the National Park Service the lighthouse structures themselves can now be transferred to local governments and private non-profit groups, while the US Coast Guard continues to maintain the lamps and lenses. These now expanded public-private relationships are emerging up and down the coastlines giving the old Federal vs. State's Rights discussion a completely new framework while putting the preservation of some of America's treasures squarely in the hands of the People.

As sailors we are uniquely able to appreciate all that has been accomplished, from construction to maintenance, on sunny days and during stormy nights. These magnificent structures, spectacular by day and reassuring beacons during the night, have brought many of us home to familiar and safe shores. Come and visit a Lighthouse this year, perhaps on National Lighthouse Day in August, learn about its history and significance and perhaps consider joining one of the many non-profit organizations that have made it their goal to spread the enduring message of America's Lighthouses.

Capt. Christoph Winter is a long-time ASA Instructor and recently joined the Twin Lights Historical Society in Highlands, New Jersey, as Trustee and Member of the Executive Board.



Fig. 1: Lighthouse Keeper Murphy Rocket surveys the horizon (ca. 1937)



Fig 2: View of the Twin Lights of the Navesink, one of the oldest lighthouses in the United States