

Stepping Stones Light (1877)



by Harlan Hamilton

Position: Latitude 40 degrees 49.5' N

Longitude 73 degrees 46.5' W

Characteristic: Oscillating green light every four seconds

Height of Tower: 38 feet

Height of Focal Plane: 46 feet

Range: 10 miles

Lantern: 300 mm lens lighted 24 hours

Automated: 1967

Structure: Red brick on granite pier; white band on SW face of pier

In colonial times Long Island Sound was known as the "Devil's Belt" due to the sudden storms and destructive nor'easters that raged in it and to the strong belief in the Devil by local inhabitants. On early maps and charts the Sound is printed as the "Devil's Belt" and the Stepping Stones as the "Devil's Stepping Stones," a cluster of mussel-covered reefs within sight of City Island. The name "Devil's Stepping Stones" persisted into the latter part of the 19th century, but it proved to be too cumbersome for mariners' charts when the lighthouse was erected on the northernmost part of the reef in 1877. However, the name lingered in local usage for a number of years. Fish peddlers used to land their boats on Throgs Neck beaches, blow their horns to summon housewives and shout, "Fresh fish – right from the Devil's Stepping Stones!" There is an inner passage along Kings Point shore marked with nun buoys which is safe for boats with a nine-foot draft or less to navigate if the mariner pays attention to what he is doing. If he goes anywhere between Stepping Stones Light and the nuns, he is asking for trouble. Boaters trying to take a short cut run aground by the score.

Congress first appropriated \$6,600 for a lighthouse to be built at the end of an extensive shoal and series of rocks which extend 8/10ths of a mile southward to the Long Island shore on April 7, 1866, followed by \$50,000 in additional funds on June 10, 1872. Original plans called for a day beacon on Stepping Stones reef and a lighthouse near the end of Hart Island, about one mile north. Apparently the federal government had difficulty obtaining title to the land on Hart Island, for in its annual report for 1874, the Light-House Board decided to change the location of the lighthouse to where it stands today. On June 23, 1874, Congress appropriated a final \$6,000 for the lighthouse, bringing its total cost to \$6,600.

Work on the lighthouse began in the summer of 1875, with A.D. Cook as contractor. Nine hundred tons of encroachment boulders were required in addition to riprap for the foun-

ation. The encroachment boulders were delivered at intervals between the summer 1875 and the spring of 1876. The foundation for the lighthouse was built directly over a large rock which barely broke the surface at low tide. The outer foundation wall consists of large, round-faced granite rocks laid in courses. The lighthouse tapers slightly inward from a base with a diameter of 48 feet to a height of about 30 feet. A rectangular space in the foundation's top was left open to create a basement for the lighthouse. In the basement is a large wooden cistern about five feet in diameter that stored fresh drinking water for the keepers. The keeper's dwelling was completed in January, 1877 despite the date 1876 carved on the front of the tower. The new lighthouse first displayed its beam on Thursday night, March 1, 1877.



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Keepers' Stories

Contrary to popular romantic notions about life at a lighthouse, life could be hard and lonely without any glamour at all, especially for keepers without wives and families. Some keepers compensated for the loss by finding comfort in the bottle, a practice strictly forbidden by the Light-House Board. I suspect that some keepers left to tend a lighthouse by themselves tipsy occasionally to "ease the pain," and were eventually dismissed for doing so. Interestingly, no reason was *ever* given for a keeper's dismissal; the records simply state he was "removed." But why? Sometimes another keeper came to the rescue of a delinquent friend. For example, in the 1920's, Charles Ferreira, keeper of Throgs Neck Light, occasionally had to row out to Stepping Stones Lighthouse and light its lamp at dusk when he noticed its keeper had not done so. Here was a case where the keeper had difficulty living alone and turned to alcohol to cope with his situation, thus neglecting his duties.

Significance of the Light

Stepping Stones Light (architect & builder unknown) is significant as an admirable example of brick and stone Second Empire style

dwelling with a Mansard roof, a style that was supplanted in the 1880s by the use of prefabricated cast iron plate construction as with the Stamford, Connecticut light. It is significant also in the history of the New York City region because it formed the principal component in the aids to navigation system serving the approach to the city from Long Island Sound. The 1870s saw a doubling in the value of shipborne commerce to New York City. Imports alone rose from \$281 million in 1870 to \$459 million in 1880. The passage northeast of the city where Long Island Sound meets the East River accounted for a substantial portion of the increase in waterborne commerce.

The hazards of the area were, for the most part, either marked or well-known, but no system signaled a continuous channel. When completed in 1877, Stepping Stones Lighthouse worked together with two older lights, Great Captain, near Greenwich, Connecticut and Execution Rocks, off Sands Point, New York, to define such a clear water channel. Ships bound for New York City from Long Island Sound stayed south of these lights and north of Stepping Stones. Upon rounding Stepping Stones, ships followed land-based aids to navigation to piers in the Bronx, Manhattan or Brooklyn. Stepping Stones Light thus played a pivotal role in New York City's waterborne commerce.

Interestingly, the Second Empire style in architecture influenced the first generation of cast iron lighthouse construction, which followed very closely after the construction of Stepping Stones Light. The 1877 Southwest Ledge Lighthouse in New Haven, Connecticut, for instance, is built of cast iron plates, but it also takes the form of a Second Empire-style dwelling. Stepping Stones Lighthouse thus typifies the very last period of stone and brick lighthouse construction. It illustrates also the trend toward lighthouse stylization which continued to affect their character even after building technology underwent total change. By the mid-1800s, the conical iron tower such as Orient Point Light had become standard, signaling the end of the brief period when lighthouses were built as architectural, rather than simply technological aids to navigation. Unfortunately, like most lighthouses in New York State, Stepping Stones Lighthouse has not yet (if ever) found a place in the National Register of Historic Places.

Second Empire Style

The phrase "Second Empire style" refers to a style of architecture developed in France during the reign of Napoleon III (1808-1873) between about 1852 and 1870. The style was a major influence on American architecture after the Civil War. Characterized by multiple

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Mansard roofs (more of which in a future article), high-pedimented dormers and a lush application of French Renaissance detail, it appeared in every form of secular building in the United States from post offices to city halls (for which it became the official style) lighthouses, city dwellings and summer cottages. Although fundamentally a masonry style, it was frequently executed in wood.

The first prominent American architect to employ the style seems to have been James Renwick (1818-1895). His two most important forages in this style were the Charity Hospital (1858-1861) on Welfare (now Roosevelt) Island in the East River of New York City and Vassar College in

Poughkeepsie, New York.

He also designed the Smithsonian Institution's "castle" (1849) and the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art (1859) in our nation's capital. The Light-House Board even adapted this popular style for some of the lighthouses in our area: Stepping Stones Light, Penfield Reef Light and North Dumpling Light. Their Mansard roofs are a clue to their Second Empire style.

Harlan Hamilton has lectured widely on the lighthouses of Long Island Sound and is the author of *Lights & Legends*, a guide to these lights, currently under revision. Information about his lectures may be had by calling him at 212-535-5690.

Stepping Around Stepping Stones - Lighthouse fans enjoyed their first ever visit to Little Gull Light this past September and may enjoy doing likewise at the historic Stepping Stones Lighthouse off Kings Point in the near future. The federal government is searching for a local government or nonprofit group to take ownership and provide public access. Among interested applicants are the Town of North Hempstead; Asian Americans for Equality of NYC, NY; Beacon Preservation Inc. of Ansonia, CT; Crabber Cup of Greenwich, CT; Historical Preservation Society of America, Washington, D.C. and Korstad Marine Preservation Society of Brooking, CT. The National Park Service will select which applicant gets the 1877 brick lighthouse at no charge.

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