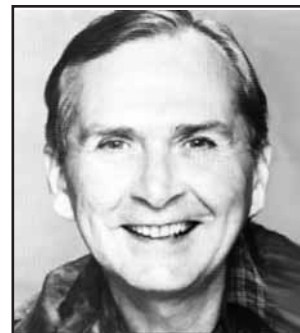


STRATFORD POINT LIGHT

(1881) Stratford, CT

by Harlan Hamilton



A Pirate's Treasure

Stratford Point Light is located in Stratford's Lordship district, known as Great Neck in the colonial period, when there were only three homes within a three-mile radius of Stratford Point. Captain Kidd was purported to have buried treasure at Stratford Point in the 18th century, and to have invoked the Devil to guard it.

In the mid-19th century, a group of Stratford citizens believed they had found a clue to the exact location of the treasure and set about to find it. For many weeks they dug at a location inside the cove at the Point. Just as the diggers had abandoned hope of finding the treasure, one of them drove his spade into something metal which resembled a chest. At the moment, the Devil leaped out of the excavation and, shrieking with rage, cursed the treasure hunters. The diggers took to their heels and never again looked for Kidd's treasure.

Lottie Lillingston, granddaughter of Keeper Benedict Lillingston, had heard the tale of Kidd's buried treasure at the Point before she came to the lighthouse as a little girl in 1869. Later, when older, she spent long hours excavating at the Point herself, but never turned over a doubloon or saw the Devil.

Description of the Lighthouse

Stratford Point Lighthouse has the double duty of showing the way into the estuary of the Housatonic River and providing seamen with one of the most exact and perfect bearings that are to be found anywhere on Long Island Sound. It stands 35' high on the shore of the Sound west of the river's mouth. Its tower contains a modern FA-251 optic with a range of 16 miles in its lantern gallery. The optic was automated in 1970. Its characteristic is a Group Flashing White every 20 seconds.

Built in 1881 to replace an earlier tower erected in 1821, the cast iron conical lighthouse is painted white with a horizontal brown band around its middle. The site includes also a wood-framed keeper's dwelling, also constructed in 1881, and a brick powerhouse built in 1911 for the fog signal apparatus. The keeper's dwelling, today the home of a Coast Guard family, is north of the tower. The brick powerhouse, painted white, presently houses an important collection of electronic aids to navigation equipment. In form and materials, Stratford Point Light is virtually identical to Bridgeport's Tongue Point Light, except it is larger.

Keepers

Life at the light was not always easy, especially for the early keepers who lived in the small, poorly constructed 1821 dwelling connected to the first tower. Since they were not permitted to keep a cow, keepers had to walk half a mile to the nearest house for milk. Although the federal government provided keepers with an acre of land for raising fresh vegetables, they had to buy their meat and groceries from a store in the village four miles away and used a horse and buggy kept in a small barn at the station to get them there and home. However, since roads, when there were any, were frequently impassible during the winter, especially after snow storms, they had to stock up on supplies they hoped would last through long snowbound weeks. Sometimes they did not.

There were no trees to block the wind on this lonely and desolate point of land jutting into Long Island Sound. The vegetation consisted of clumps of beach plums, sumac, bayberry and trailing blackberry vines. The fruit of the latter was eaten and enjoyed in season and made into jam to be enjoyed in the long winter months. It took courage, inner strength and ingenuity to survive at such a post.

Or cold, snowy nights, the life of an old-time keeper (sometimes called "wickies") was not to be envied, for the lantern in the tower needed constant watching, and the fog bell had to be wound every half hour. If the wind was strong, the glass panes of the lantern gallery had to be washed with alcohol to remove sleet and salt spray.

Once, on a foggy June day, the keeper at Stratford Point Light rang the fog bell for 32 consecutive hours.



Stratford Point Light

His record was broken by subsequent keeper, Theodore Judson who, in a blinding February snow storm, rang the bell for 104 hours, almost five full days and nights. The storm stopped and then continued with such unabated fury that Judson had to operate the bell for another 103 hours nonstop, thus ringing it for a total of almost 207 hours with only a brief rest. Certainly this must be some sort of record.

The last civilian keeper of the light at Stratford Point was Daniel Francis McCoart (1895-1968), who completed more than 45 years of honorable government service, principally in the Lighthouse Service and then with the Coast Guard. During his tenure at the light from 1945-1963, McCoart received "excellent" ratings during inspections of his light station in 1948, 1949, 1950, and 1963. This was no small accomplishment, since only nine light stations in the entire country received such a rating.

Keeper McCoart received 20 commendations for assisting disabled vessels, for maintaining his station in exceptionally good condition and for rescuing mariners in distress. In recognition for his long and honorable service, the Coast Guard presented him with the Albert Gallatin Award on his final day of service, October 31, 1963.

Return of the Cupola

In 1969, the Coast Guard removed the cupola (lantern gallery) and its 4th order Fresnel lens from the top of the lighthouse to accommodate a new, oversized

rotating optic, a DCB-224 lens with a 1000 watt lamp, leaving the tower looking like the headless horseman of Washington Irving's tale. Weather instruments and a small Fresnel-type modern lens also were mounted on the lantern deck.

The Coast Guard donated the cupola and Fresnel lens to the local historical society, which in turn donated it to the Town of Stratford. For years the cupola and lens remained in Boothe Park, but were never assembled as an operating unit.

When Senior Chief Paul Vanderkaay, Officer in charge of the Navigation Team, Group Long Island Sound, New Haven, moved into the keeper's dwelling with his family in 1988, he took an immediate interest in the physical appearance of the lighthouse. Besides building a handsome wooden entrance door on the first floor, Chief Vanderkaay set about restoring the lighthouse to its

original appearance by reinstalling the missing cupola. He figured out that a smaller, less powerful lantern would work as well as the DCB-224 lens.

With the blessing of Carol Lowell, Stratford Historical Society President; Lewis B. Knapp, Town Historian; Ron Owens, Town Manager; and the approval of Captain T.H. Collins, Commander of the Long Island Group, USCG, the cupola was returned to the lighthouse in May 1990 after an absence of 21 years. The Coast Guard contributed \$80,000 toward its restoration.

On June 28, 1990, the White Oak Construction Company donated its crane and two operators to hoist the cupola to its former place atop the tower. And on July 14th, 1990, the Coast Guard held a Rededication Ceremony and changed the illuminating apparatus from a DCB-224 to a state of the art FA-251 lens, the one that remains

in the lighthouse today.

Importance of the Light

Stratford Point Light is the fourth oldest lighthouse station in Connecticut still under Coast Guard jurisdiction. It was built by the Lighthouse Board in the 1870s to cut costs in design, production and transportation at the peak of shipping in Long Island Sound of a conical, prefabricated cast iron lighthouse, an perhaps one of the earliest such lights in the First Coast Guard District, even the nation.

Established by the federal government to mark the mouth of the Housatonic River, the light station at Stratford Point has made an important contribution to the history of aids to navigation in Long Island Sound. In addition, it is significant as one of the few light stations with three principal components remaining in tact: the lighthouse, the keeper's dwelling and the fog signal house. Lastly, the site has had a beacon for 178 years, a remarkable record. The lighthouse was added rightly to the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.

Harlan Hamilton has lectured widely on the lighthouses of Long Island Sound and is the author of "Lights & Legends," a guide to these lights. Autographed copies of his book and information about his lectures may be had by calling him at: (212) 535-5690.