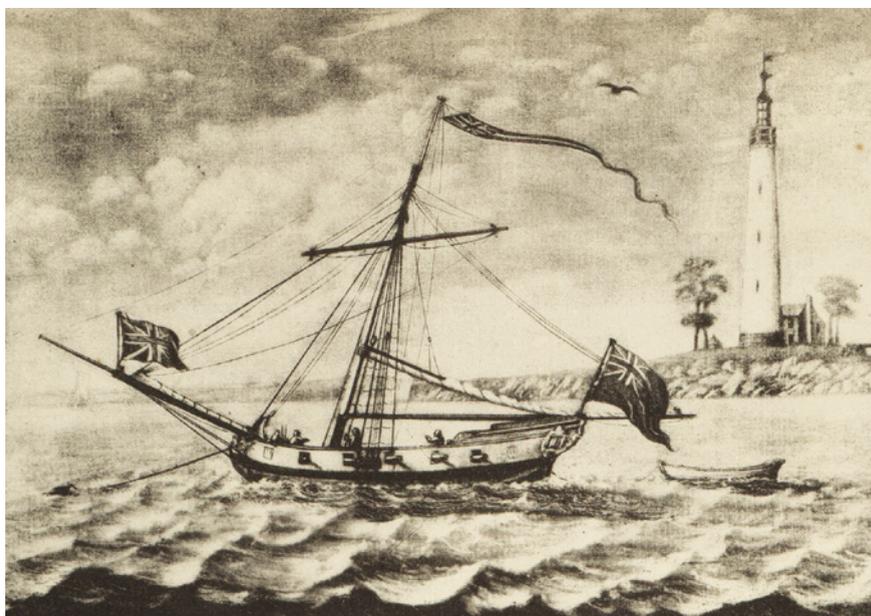




Bright Beacons for Dark Seas

David A. Norris looks at sources for lighthouse and lightship family history records

LIGHTHOUSES TODAY ARE REALLY HISTORIC SITES AND TOURIST attractions, but in past centuries, they were necessary navigational aids to mariners. These beacons greeted ships nearing the mainland or islands, and warned them of treacherous waters filled with dangerous rocks and shoals. At sea, experienced sailors could tell where they were by knowing the particular shapes, relationships to landmarks, and painted patterns of each lighthouse. If you had ancestors who lived and worked in a lighthouse, there are numerous sources that can provide information on their careers, and pictures and maps showing their workplaces.



First in the US, the Boston Lighthouse was first lit in 1716. (Wikipedia)

Several lighthouses were built in the colonial US before the Revolutionary War. First was the Boston Lighthouse, lit on Little Brewster Island in 1716. A later lighthouse dating from 1783 stands on the site now. The oldest original lighthouse building in the US today is the Sandy Hook Light in New Jersey, which was built in 1764.

All of the lighthouses standing in 1789 were transferred to the control of the newly founded U.S. Lighthouse Establishment, which was then under the Treasury Department. The first one built by the new federal

government was put up at Cape Henry, Virginia in 1792. By 1822, there were 70; the total reached 331 lighthouses in 1852. An 1831 report stated that the government paid the salaries of 163 “keepers of lighthouses” and 18 “keepers of floating lights”.

About 1,500 lighthouses in all were built by the US government; the peak number in use at one time was about 850, in 1910. After World War II, new radio navigation technology made lighthouses obsolete. Only about 60 lighthouses still employed keepers in the early 1960s. In 1998, the old 1783 Boston Lighthouse became the last to be automated.



The Minot's Ledge Lighthouse in Massachusetts seems to rise out of the sea. (Wikipedia)