

Ralph Eshelman

Moving a Lighthouse

A Brief History of the Efforts to Restore Drum Point Lighthouse

Drum Point Lighthouse keeper William Yeatman with his children, September 9, 1918. The wooden bridge at left connects the lighthouse to the shore. Courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

Costing about \$5,000, Drum Point Lighthouse was built in 1883 near the mouth of the Patuxent River where it meets the Chesapeake Bay. This screwpile “cottage-type” lighthouse, one of over 40 such structures built in the Chesapeake, safely guided mariners in and out of Patuxent River for 79 years until it was decommissioned on September 6, 1962. The lighthouse property was transferred to the State of Maryland and plans were made to restore the structure and open it to the public, but land access to the site was blocked by several miles of private property. Ownership of the property eventually reverted to the General Services Administration.

Abandoned, the lighthouse soon suffered from a lack of maintenance and vandalism. The lighthouse was originally built off the end of Drum Point in water deep enough for small boats to pass between it and the shore. Over the years, however, the point accreted so that it was accessible by foot. Vandals easily entered the lighthouse. John Hanson, Drum Point’s last civilian keeper, who

Much of this article is based on Ralph Eshelman, *A History of Drum Point Lighthouse*, Special Publication no. 1 (Solomons, Maryland: Calvert Marine Museum, 1979); and Dennis L. Noble and Ralph Eshelman “A Lighthouse for Drum Point,” *The Keeper’s Log*, Summer (1987), pp. 2-9.

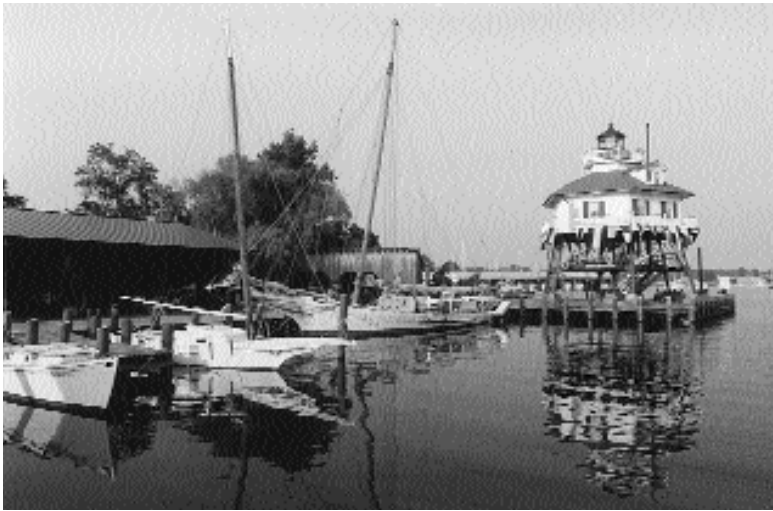
In the spring of 1975, the seven, 10"-diameter, solid cast-iron piles of the Drum Point Lighthouse were severed at the water line while a 110' boom, steam-operated crane placed on a barge lifted the entire three-story lighthouse and rested it on the side of a barge for its trip to the museum. Courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.



lived nearby, related that he avoided the point because he “could not bear to see the condition of the structure.” In 1966, the Calvert County Historical Society decided to acquire and restore the lighthouse as a special project. The federal government, however, was unwilling to deed the land to the society or to the county, and government funding agencies were unwilling to assist the project until a legal deed was in hand and a viable method was found to get the public to the site. As an interim step to help save the lighthouse, the historical society was instrumental in having the structure listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Meanwhile, the lighthouse continued to suffer. A fire had been started in one room of the structure, but fortunately it was extinguished before major damage resulted. Vandals had by this time torn down all the doors and windows and

knocked out the lantern glass; the cast-iron lens pedestal had been ripped from the lantern deck and tossed over the side. There was evidence of attempts to loosen the bolts which held the fog bell in place. A grass-roots level of support grew, however, as people learned about the plight of the lighthouse and efforts underway to save it. A local marine contractor took his barge and crane out to the lighthouse and removed the fog bell for safekeeping. A neighbor near the lighthouse donated the lens pedestal after he found it lying in the sand.



Drum Point Lighthouse, restored and on exhibit at its new location. Courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

After continual lobbying of Congress, the federal government agreed in 1974 to give the lighthouse, not the land, to the Calvert County government. By this time, the historical society had established the Calvert Marine Museum. The plan was to seek the funds to move the lighthouse to the grounds of the museum, restore it, interpret it, and open it to the public. Thanks to a grant from the Maryland Historical Trust, funding the

move of the lighthouse about two nautical miles to the museum's waterfront was accomplished in the spring of 1975. Fortunately, because a new bridge was being constructed nearby, the B. F. Diamond Construction Company of Savannah, Georgia, was in the right place at the right time. The seven, 10"-diameter, solid cast-iron piles were severed at the water line while a 110' boom, steam-operated crane placed on a barge lifted the entire three-story lighthouse and rested it on the side of a barge for



its trip to the museum. Tugs slowly towed the barge, and the crane lifted the lighthouse onto its new foundation while a large crowd gathered to watch and celebrate the event.

Ironically, because the lighthouse was moved from its original location, the structure was removed from listing in the National Register. After the move, successful restoration according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, with the

understanding that moving the lighthouse was the best way to ensure its preservation and make it more easily available to the public, the Drum Point Lighthouse was relisted in the National Register.

The Calvert Marine Museum was fortunate in that Anna Weems Ewalt, who was born in the lighthouse in 1903, was willing to head up a group to find appropriate furnishings for the interior, largely based on Anna's memory. Anna also donated a few family items such as china that was used in the lighthouse. Additional funding from the Maryland Historical Trust, the historical society, and donations from private sources were used to restore and interpret the lighthouse. The lighthouse was officially dedicated on June 24, 1978, amid much fanfare and officialdom. Then Maryland Governor Blair Lee cut the dedication ribbon.

The Calvert Marine Museum conducts daily tours of the lighthouse. Occasionally, special programs including living histories are held at the lighthouse. Each Christmas the lighthouse is decorated for the holiday season and open to the public. Each spring the museum's volunteer corps conducts its annual lighthouse cleanup. Curtains, rugs, and linens are washed and pressed; the entire exterior and interior are thoroughly cleaned; windows washed inside and out; stove polished; etc. Local grocery stores and fast food establishments donate food for the workers. This spring cleanup has become an annual ritual, getting the lighthouse ready for the upcoming busy summer season. After the cleanup, the museum's maritime curator conducts an annual inspection of the lighthouse, similar to the earlier white glove inspections by Lighthouse Board Inspectors. The inspection includes a complete review of cleanliness, needed repairs, and long-term maintenance needs which are then addressed in upcoming budgetary processes. An endowment for the maintenance of the lighthouse was also established to help meet these costs.

Today the Drum Point Lighthouse is featured in local tourism ads; it is used as a logo by several area businesses, and generally is considered a local icon. The dedication of the Calvert County Historical Society, Calvert County Government, and the Calvert Marine Museum prevented the loss of the lighthouse and turned it into an important source of community pride and reminder of the region's heritage.

Former director of the Calvert Marine Museum, Ralph Eshelman serves as a maritime historian to the National Maritime Initiative of the National Park Service through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Lighthouse Society.