

This Day in History... April 12, 1792

Montauk Point Light

On April 12, 1792, Montauk Point Light was authorized by President George Washington. It was the first lighthouse built in the state of New York and one of the first public works projects of the United States.

The Montauk Point Light is located on Turtle Hill, which the local Native Americans called Womponamon, meaning “to the east.” The area was named after the Montauk tribe, which ruled over many of the other nearby tribes. They would often light fires on the hill, signaling a council meeting to the other tribes.

The British occupied Long Island and Montauk Point during the Revolutionary War. They kept a large fire burning on the hill to indicate the eastern end of Long Island for their ships, which were blockading the area. During the war, a few British ships were destroyed in a storm and the wrecks remain in the nearby waters.



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Issued to cover the registration fee plus the single letter rate on letters bound to foreign destinations.

After the war ended, America’s new government began making plans for international trade. However, before that would be feasible, they’d need to improve the conditions along the Atlantic coast, which had seen many destroyed ships since the first settlers arrived in America. In 1792, Congress approved the purchase of land at Montauk Point to establish a lighthouse to warn incoming ships of dangers and guide them along the south side of the island to New York Harbor. On April 12, 1792, President George Washington authorized the construction of the light. Continental Congressman Ezra L’Hommedieu represented New York City’s Chamber of Commerce and spoke with President Washington about the light, selected the location for it, and designed it.

Construction began on June 7, 1796, by John McComb Jr. and was completed five months later on November 5. The first lighthouse keeper was Jacob Hand, and he lit the lamps in the lantern tower for the first time in early April 1797. The original Montauk Point Light was 80 feet tall, but in 1860, it was renovated and increased to just over 110 feet in height. At the same time, a first-order Fresnel lens was installed in the lantern tower. This lens stood 12 feet high, 6 feet across, and weighed 10,000 pounds. The keeper’s house was updated at the same time as the rest of the tower. In 1873, a steam-powered fog signal was installed, and in 1899 the tower was painted with its signature red-brown stripe (originally, the tower was all white). The lighthouse began running on electricity in 1940.



This was the first lighthouse built in New York state.



According to Ezra L’Hommedieu, “By 1797, the harbor was handling a third of the nation’s trade with other countries.”

The Montauk Point Light was managed by civilian keepers until World War II, when the US Army took it over as part of the Eastern Coastal Defense Shield. The Army also established Camp Hero, with 6- and 16-inch gun batteries. The US Coast Guard took over operations after the war until 1987, when it became fully automated. The lighthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012 and declared a National Historic Landmark. Today, it’s the fourth-oldest active lighthouse in the United States.

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