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Montauk Point Lightfall

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Abstract – *Montauk Point is the eastern most land mass on Long Island, New York and as such, of strategic importance for both navigation and communication. There has always been a lightfall at this point; in pre-revolutionary war eras, fires provided the light, later a light house was erected after the establishment of an independent government. As the land forms a point, a promontory reaching into the Atlantic Ocean, the lights identified the presence of dangerous rocks at the end of the point as well as the path of safe passage north and south of the rocks. The lightfall saved lives that would have been lost from shipwrecks and preserved valuable cargo along this busy north south shipping venue. The lights served another purpose, that of communication. A series of lights stretching along the eastern coast could signal warnings or calls to congregate, thus protecting the area from unanticipated invaders and uniting disparate tribes living in what is now the eastern coast of the USA. After the establishment of the American independence, the first president, George Washington, commissioned a lighthouse to be constructed on the site, where it stands today.*

Keywords: *Gardiner, Lighthouse, Montauk, Shipwreck.*

I. INTRODUCTION

During America's pre-colonial era about thirteen sites have been identified as lightfalls on the Atlantic coast. Communicating with smoke messages and deploying lightfall as navigation aids, these tactical fires were critical to the well-being of east coast peoples. They helped prevent shipwrecks, saved lives, preserved valuable cargo, and protected the coast from invaders and facilitated communication when warfare seemed likely. Settlers traded between the regions currently known as Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Montauk Point's location was key to safely guiding ships around the rocky shoals and safely to harbours and thus enhanced the growth of the region and the development of New York as a major port and city.

II. ECONOMIC UNDERPININGS

A lighthouse or lightfall is considered a particular type of good, labelled a "public good" in economic theory. The construction serves the public but the inability to charge for its service means a free market will not result in the provision of that good. Thus the government may provide good to serve the public and levy taxes to pay for the construction. Yet these early lightfalls pre-date the establishment of the US government, raising the question: who built or used them? Did England or other countries provide these lights on the shores of their new colonies, as some might postulate? Did indigenous tribes, local merchants or some union of ship captains lead the construction of these pinnacles of safe passage?[1] Loss of life and cargoes certainly would motivate the construction of a lighthouse or establishment of a lightfall however, the inability to be compensated would be a detriment to construction, unlike roads and tolls. The inability to be compensated results from the characteristic of a public good: non-excludability; that is, once the light is shining, one can't exclude non-payers from using it.

The early lighthouse development on the Atlantic coast at Montauk Point is particularly interesting as George Washington, the first president, commissioned it as the US's first lighthouse. Additionally, the evolving light structures at Montauk Point was of strategic importance for both indigenous people and colonists. Lit fires sent messages across the miles and across Long Island Sound in addition to its importance for navigation.

The light at Montauk is located on rare high ground at the eastern most tip of Long Island, NY, it first served as a guidepost for the indigenous tribes who lived there for centuries and later for the European colonists who settled in the region. Smoke or fire beacons there could be seen to the north in Connecticut or Rhode Island and also visible by ships approaching from the Atlantic Ocean heading to what would become New York Harbor as well as the busy shipping lanes bringing raw materials from the south.

III. INDIGENOUS MONTAUK

The native peoples of New England "spoke languages with a common Algonquian root, lived in small settlements linked by extended kinship systems, and shared a common belief system."[2] Pequots in the Connecticut River area dominated the many other native tribes[3] who lived in the Hudson River Valley and the western portions of New England. The Pequots, who at one time numbered 4,000 braves[4] were fierce warriors to whom neighbouring tribes paid tribute to keep the peace.

The Pequots also terrorized the early English settlers who migrated to the Connecticut River region. They were incensed with the English who brought a small pox epidemic to the area from 1633 to 1634, and the earlier Dutch settlers helped escalate the violence.[5] The Dutch actively traded furs with the Pequots, and had claimed the river for themselves. To solidify their claim, they pitted the Pequots against the English, who had settled on Pequot tribal lands along with Spain and Holland who had ambitions in the Connecticut River basin and Long Island.[6]

Ironically it was an Englishman living in the Netherlands who was commissioned to quell the violence. Lion Gardiner was recruited in 1635 for a four-year contract, he was paid one hundred pounds annually by a company of patentees with land in this new England.[7] Gardiner, agreed to take possession of the Connecticut River's mouth by building a fort there. He laid out a coastal town in what became Saybrook, Connecticut, just across the large body of water separating Long Island from the Continental US, the Long Island Sound.[8] This fort was intended to protect colonists from the growing threats from the Dutch and Pequots.[9]

Consistent with the Mercantilist economy, early settlers were under pressure to find resources to send back to London to repay the loans taken to get to America. With no gold, silver or gems in the region, furs became an important commodity. Furs were highly valued in Europe, they were flexible and lightweight to ship back to London. Consequently, the English hoped to break the Dutch-Pequot control of the fur and wampum trade. The English wanted to take over the Connecticut River Valley trade for themselves.[10]

Escalating confrontations culminated in what became the Pequot War in 1636. When the Pequot Sachem (chief) Sowheag's lands were taken from him in Wethersfield, the Pequots started a major campaign.[11] The General Court in Hartford (Connecticut) decided to declare an offensive against the tribe,[12] and Captain John Mason led a vicious attack. "Pequots were burned to death in their homes while their warriors were away."[13] When Pequot Sachem Sassacus heard about the killings, he rushed to Mystic to attack Mason's company.[14] Rising up against the Pequot assaults, the settlers banded together using "fire, sword and guns."[15] They massacred Pequots on the hills of Mystic, Connecticut, significantly reducing their numbers.

IV. ACROSS LONG ISLAND SOUND

To obtain dominance of the area, the English had to conquer the Pequots and destroy their Dutch competitors by sewing discord between the tribes.[16] Surviving Pequots were hunted down and either killed or enslaved.[17] This all-out war against the Pequots of Connecticut also set the stage for the eventual settlement by Lion Gardiner in the Long Island region.

Shortly after the Pequot massacre, a Montaukett paddled across the Long Island Sound and came to see Lion Gardiner at Fort Saybrook. In his account of the meeting, Gardiner wrote that this individual wanted to know if he [Gardiner] and all English were angry with all tribes. He asked if Gardiner would trade with him, the Sachem of the Montauketts on Long Island,[18] and with his elder brother Youghco of Manhansset [later Shelter Island], who was the grand sachem of all of Paumanack (indigenous name for Long Island). They and the other sachems would end their tribute payments to the Pequots and support

the English, [19] instead of aligning with the Dutch. Gardiner asked Waiandance to trade only with the English and also to kill any of the Pequots who came to him.[20] When Waiandance later produced five Pequot heads, the deal was sealed. The English used this alliance with Waiandance and other friendly tribes to strengthen England's claim to Long Island. The Dutch had settled on the island now known as Manhattan, at the very western end of Long Island and this pact limited Dutch expansion eastward from what was then known as New Amsterdam.[21]

Concurrently in 1637, while the Pequot War was raging, the Earl of Stirling acquired the whole of Long Island and adjacent islands through a grant from the English Plymouth Colony upon the request of King Charles I to settle the region.[22] English commanders with Gardiner's assistance established several treaties with the Montauketts to secure the eastern end of the island as a foothold against the Dutch. In addition to befriending Waiandance, Gardiner learned Algonquin. He became instrumental in many tribal dealings through his facile language skills. The Montauketts even permitted English farmers to use Montauk as grazing land for their cattle and sheep to keep them dry and healthy.

The eastern indigenous tribes on Long Island made a conscious social and economic decision to side with the English over the Dutch. With a shared connection in Connecticut, they identified more with the English than they did with the Dutch, who had settled first in New Amsterdam to the west. It made more sense economically, too. It took about "six days to sail the length of Long Island [westward to New Amsterdam] to ship whale oil, a principal product 200 years ago."[23] Whale oil became a staple for oil lighting and sustenance that defined the east end.[24] It took a shorter time to cross the Long Island Sound to Connecticut, Rhode Island or Boston.

For two more years, Gardiner stayed on to command Fort Saybrook until 1639. He capitalized on his friendly relationship with Waiandance and purchased an island off Long Island's east end. Arranged by Waiandance, it was Poggatacut–also known as Youghco–and his wife Aswaw of the Shelter Island Manhanssets, who signed the deed.[25] Gardiner's property is noted as the earliest settlement by the British in the state of New York.[26]

Though they lived and controlled some of the smallest territories on Long Island, evidence suggests that the Montauketts were a citadel of power.[27] They were, in fact, the royal tribe, and Waiandance, its powerful chief, was soon-to-be the Grand Sachem when his older brother died. It would be recorded in town records that it was Waiandance from whom colonists would purchase their lands throughout nearly the whole extent of Long Island in these early days of its settlement.

The pact of peace and the lasting friendship between Gardiner and Waiandance relieved eastern Long Island of the strife and carnage that persisted in New England for forty more years. In fact, there were no battles between the tribes on Long Island and their Long Island settlers.[28] When the Narragansetts pillaged the camps of the Montauketts, Gardiner interceded to retrieve Waiandance's daughter, who was kidnapped by the Rhode Island tribe.

V. MONTAUK'S LIGHTFALL

On the north side of Montauk Point, a bay and pond area provided a safe harbour. Nearby, the Montauketts lit signal fires which could be seen from Connecticut to what is now New Jersey to summon chiefs and warriors to communal meetings. The largest and best fortifications of purely Native American construction in the United States is found a bit to the west of the pond. Noted on an early map in 1658,[29] the fortification erected on the north side of Fort Pond is now called Fort Hill. It was about 100 feet square and its remains are still visible.[30] Its rampart and parapet were formed of earth with a ditch at the foot of the glacis and probably palisaded with the trunks of fallen trees.[31] At each angle there was apparently a round tower of earth and stone, and the whole would probably have held from 300 to 500 individuals.[32]

The Montauk peninsula, ending at the highlands of Turtle Hill at Montauk Point, "seemed a probable site for a beacon. The Montauketts were the first to recognize that fact by setting signal fires there to guide their dugout canoes around the Point."[33] Fire lights could be seen across the waters of the Long Island and Block Island Sounds.

Lightfalls or signal fires facilitated communication first between indigenous peoples and then subsequent early settlers as Europeans used fires as means of communication in the early colonies. The movements of an armed force could be signalled by the fires that blazed from a hilltop, to be answered far and near.[34] There was a regular network of these beacons, with sentinels to watch and fire them. These signal sentinels became expert in flashing their news from one to the other.

In fact, a chain of fires proved to be of the greatest service to the people and to colonial troops. Once "systematized and the signals agreed upon, warnings could be sent from Philadelphia to Boston via New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut, with incredible rapidity, or duplicated along Long Island, through Montauk, Point Judith, and Newport."[35] They were a valuable though rudimentary means of rapid communication. "For much of the Revolution, the British kept a huge bonfire burning on Turtle Hill at Montauk Point as a guide for the Royal Navy that patrolled Long Island Sound."[36] These large fires warned of the dangerous waters off the point for the British warships and were in constant use for active communication and as navigation guideposts.

VI. IMPORTANCE OF MONTAUK

Long Island was formed after the Ice Age, when glaciers slid across continental North America and melted into the ocean. The deposits of the melting glaciers formed the long narrow island, aptly named Long Island. At the end of the island, offshore at Montauk Point, numerous shoals and rocky reefs extended into the waters. Sea voyaging remained an extremely hazardous undertaking which could and did sink many vessels in early times; charts of the American coast were not readily available. Without a light to mark the point, vessels bound to or from New Amsterdam [later New York City] had no perspective of their locations. That is why Montauk Point became an important landfall light supporting the exchange of goods.

While Long Island is generally flat, Montauk Point is elevated at a commanding elevation of seventy-one feet,[37] creating a tactical advantage on the east end. Because this high headland looked like the back of a turtle, it became known as Turtle Hill, though the Montaukett tribe who lived there called it Wamponamon—meaning at or to the east.[38] Turtle Hill was the site of a light marker for years before it was purchased by the United States government (early 1796). It was the farthermost eastern light for the approach to New York's harbour through the Long Island Sound and to the colonies in New England. Of its bays and inlets, Long Island probably had about three to four hundred miles of shorefront where vessels came to grief.[39] In fact, early seamen referred to Montauk Point as rocky and dangerous.[40] Due to swiftly moving currents, rocky terrains, and shifting sand, some 400 shipwrecks have been documented from 1657 to 1962.[41]

VII. CONCLUSION

The hazardous water conditions and lack of navigation charts made a lightfall, whether a signal fire by indigenous people or constructed lighthouse after the RevolutionaryWar, important for communication alerts and maritime guides. They indicated land and pointed to the calmer waters of the Long Island Sound. The indigenous Montaukett tribe as well as early colonial settlers were served well by these bonfires and safe passage along the east coast as well as into New Amsterdam (New York habour) facilitated the development of the colonies.

George Washington personally authorized the commission of Montauk Point for a lighthouse in 1792. Constructed in 1796, the Montauk Point Lighthouse was established "specifically to promote New York as the receiving port for British manufactured goods in America."[42] These and other seacoast lighthouses were critical to the growth of America by developing a steady revenue stream for the new federal government and specifically by facilitating foreign trade. Goods were guided safely through Long island Sound to New Amsterdam but also north /south trade between the Carolinas (cotton) and Boston/ Providence manufacturing centers.. They supported the coffers of the new American government with the custom house duties imposed on the foreign wares, while raw materials were shipped safely to European ports. Today, as a federal property, Montauk Point Lighthouse holds the distinction as the fourth oldest light beacon in the United States in continuous operation. It follows behind some other

colonial lighthouses in continuous operation in Sandy Hook, New Jersey (1764); Boston Harbor, Massachusetts (1783); and Portland Head, Maine (1791).[43]

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