

TUCKER'S ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

LIKE HUMPTY DUMPTY, IT HAD A GREAT FALL

As the story goes, Lighthouse Keeper Arthur Rider and his nephew actually slept in the abandoned lighthouse the night before it fell into the water. Not real smart by today's standards; but they obviously felt the cedar structure swaying and got out safely. The crash into the Atlantic Ocean was documented for posterity by a series of pictures taken by the nephew with his Brownie Box Camera.

By definition Lighthouses and Life Saving Stations were located along the shoreline - mainly at desolate spots, subject to the quirks of nature, storms and erosion. The barrier island of Sea Haven or Tucker's Island as it was more frequently called, once situated just south of New Jersey's barrier island of Long Beach, was no exception.

Sea Haven was in existence for over two hundred years, continually changing size and shape. Sometimes it was a true island; at other times it was a peninsula connected to Long Beach. Inlets came and went with names such as Old Inlet and New Inlet. Sand eroding from the eastern side of the island was a continual and major problem. Sometimes some was deposited by nature on the southern and western sides; but more often storms hammered the ocean side.

Ruben Tucker purchased a sandy strip of land in 1765 from Ephriam Morse who used the island for his cattle to graze on the salt hay. Tucker's Island became the first resort in New Jersey with the Tucker boarding house, though this fact is debated by Cape May and Atlantic City historians. Needless to say, the only way to get to the island was by sailboat from Atlantic City or Tuckerton. During the Revolutionary War Tucker's sons Ebenezer and Steven took opposing sides; a not-uncommon happening among families at the time, but one that divided the family forever.

The first Tucker's Island Lighthouse was constructed in 1848, a small light that was in existence for only twelve years. In 1865 the next Tucker's Island/Little Egg Harbor Light was erected. If readers are confused about the geography of the island over the years, imagine how ship's captains fared looking toward land, trying to figure out where they were. No wonder New Jersey became known as the graveyard of the Atlantic.

Located approximately 20 miles south of the red and white Barnegat Lighthouse and 12 miles north of Atlantic City's Absecon Lighthouse, the lighthouse was well situated. A Life Saving Station, two hotels - the Colombia and the St. Albans (owned by the Lighthouse's first keeper Eber Rider) - and houses appeared on the scene. All were easy to build with a lot of washed up lumber from shipwrecks and no electricity or plumbing to worry about.

Winter was the time for serious life saving duties (with a school/church for the families) while summer became a fun time for visitors and homeowners. Boats sailed to Tucker's Island on a daily seasonal basis while the steam yachts "Barclay" and "Pohatcong" departed from Edge Cove in Tuckerton. Ladies in long dresses, long sleeves and hats clammed, fished, and crabbed along with the men and children. Visitors went "sea bathing," a new health concept originated in Atlantic City. Mosquitoes and flies must have been bad; but pictures show happy people enjoying the activities.

The Sea Haven Improvement Company of Philadelphia plotted a massive sub-division on paper only. While the engineers might have been smart as could be, none of them knew about erosion. Other plans were kicked around for the island including a bridge and eventual railroad to the destination. In the second half of the 1800's it was thought that Tucker's Island would be around forever.

Eber Rider was the first Tucker's Island Lighthouse Keeper. He and his two wives had twenty -one children, leaving no doubt as to one of the Tucker's Island pastimes. The light itself was turned off during

the Civil War and re-lit in 1866. Jarvis Rider, the oldest son, became head of the Life Saving Station, situated about a mile south of the Lighthouse in a location that was better suited to launching rescue boats.

After his retirement in 1904, son Arthur Rider took over his father's duties. He and his family lived in the Lighthouse as his father had done. Together father and son managed the light for a record sixty-three years.

Around 1900 Tucker's Island began to be plagued by a number of storms and hurricanes. Sand washed away, houses and the two old hotels fell apart or were inundated by water. The ocean came closer and closer to the Lighthouse, water swirling around the footings. An inlet opened up north of the Lighthouse causing more problems. Both the Lighthouse and Life Saving Station had to be abandoned.

In 1915 the US Life Saving Service, started by William Newell, a New Jersey physician and legislator, merged with a few other governmental organizations to form the US Coast Guard.

On October 12, 1927 the Tucker's Island Lighthouse literally toppled over. Sadly, it was ordered burned by the Coast Guard. During a time of the Great Depression, there was no money to re-build another Lighthouse. The island was washing away at such a fast rate that a new and safer location would have had to be found. The toppled structure and remains still standing was thought to be possible navigational hazards, floating out to sea or resting under the surface. (Immigrant ships from Europe were headed to Ellis Island in New York Harbor on an almost daily basis while others traded along the coastal cities from Maine to Florida.)

Tucker's Island continued to erode; by World War II it was almost gone. A few curiosity seekers and picnickers still explored the ruins, and the World War II volunteer Coast Guard unit kept watch off shore, but the island was seen as a lost cause. Before a day of modern technology and perpetual beach re-nourishment projects, barrier islands were thought of as being expendable. They just came and went over the years – it was a fact of nature.

Today a small sandbar has arisen adjacent to the Edwin Forsythe Preserve at the southwestern end of Long Beach Island. A favorite spot for kids and dogs, it has been named Tucker's Island. Due to years of erosion the original Lighthouse would have been located a few hundred yards out beyond the breakers of today.

Stories abound of life on Tucker's Island. It has been documented in books, and the series of pictures adorn places like Tucker's Restaurant in Beach Haven. John Bailey Lloyd's Eighteen Miles of History chronicles the Tucker's Island years.

Almost life size pictures amaze visitors at the Tuckerton Seaport Maritime Museum in Tuckerton as they enter the re-created Lighthouse. The Seaport's structure stands five miles from its original location. Visitors clamor for information about the Tucker's Island Lighthouse and a barrier island gone forever along the Jersey coast.

One great mystery remains: where is the Fresnel light that once flashed its six red flashes and one longer white one warning mariners of treacherous shoals?