

Montauk Point: Strategic Pre-Revolutionary Lightfall for Marine Guidance and Communication

Abby Dress

Thomas Jefferson University

Susan Christoffersen

Thomas Jefferson University

Abstract

During America's pre-colonial development period about thirteen sites were used as lightfalls or watch towers on the Atlantic coast. Early tribes and colonists most certainly understood that Montauk Point—this eastern most point on Long Island, New York—was strategic. Communicating with smoke messages and deploying lightfall as navigation aids, these tactical fires were critical to the well-being of Long Island. They helped save lives from shipwrecks, preserved valuable cargo, and protected the coast from invaders and warfare. The fires further increased intercoastal contact. Settlers traded between the Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island regions. Montauk Point's location likewise positioned the growth of the region and the development of New York as a major port and city.

Economic theory postulates that a lighthouse or watch tower is a particular type of good, labelled a "public good", that serves the public interest but the inability to charge for its service leads to under provision by the market and thus necessitates provision by the government. 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? Loss of life and cargoes certainly would motivate the construction of a lighthouse or a site's use as a watch tower. However, the inability to be compensated from those who benefitted due to non-excludability arguably would be a detriment to construction, unlike roads and tolls.

This research traces early lighthouse development on the Atlantic coast at Montauk Point where the first president, George Washington commissioned the US's first lighthouse. We examine the importance of Montauk Point and its evolving light structures for both indigenous people and colonists. Lit fires sent messages across the miles and across Long Island Sound and was used by tribes and colonists to protect from warfare, save lives, preserve valuable cargo, and aid intercoastal trade.

Located on strategic high ground at the eastern most tip of Long Island, NY, the light at Montauk first served as a guidepost for the indigenous tribes and then the 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.

Keywords

Montauk Lighthouse, Montaukett, Gardiner, Watch Tower, Shipwreck.

