Lighthouse Buttons: Part I
By Joy Journeay & Mary Weinberg (Dayton, Ohio)

The first known lighthouse in the world was the Pharos of Alexandria, Egypt. Ptolemy I and his son Ptolemy II constructed it between 300 and 280 B.C. The Pharos stood about 450 feet high and was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was destroyed by invaders and earthquakes in the 1300s.

The oldest currently existing lighthouse in the world is considered to be La Coruna in Spain that dates from ca. 20 B.C.

The first U.S. lighthouse was on Boston’s Little Brewster Island. It was erected in 1716. The first keeper was George Worthylake who was drowned, along with his wife and daughter, when returning to the island in 1718. The original tower was destroyed by the British and eventually reconstructed in 1784.

The United States Lighthouse Service was created by Congress and established as the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment (USLHE) on August 7, 1879. Prior to this date the states and territories owned the lighthouses. It was originally placed under the direction of the Department of Revenue (which disbanded in 1820). Next its leadership transferred to the Departments of Treasury (until 1903), Commerce, and then Transportation.

The U.S. Lighthouse Establishment Board led the Service from 1852 until July 1, 1920 when Commerce created the Bureau of Lighthouses. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) next took over leadership on July 7, 1939. The USCG is one of the five U.S. armed military

All buttons in this article are from the collection of Mary Weinberg (Dayton, Ohio) unless otherwise noted. Why does Mary know so much about lighthouses? She says, “Jim (her husband) is a ‘MAJOR’ Lighthouse person. We were married at the foot of Marblehead (Ohio) Lighthouse 12 years ago!”

The Western Regional Button Association is pleased to share our educational articles with the button collecting community. This article appeared in the April 2007 WRBA newsletter, Territorial News. Enjoy! And consider joining WRBA! Go to www.WRBA.us
Lightships were employed where the water was too deep to construct a lighthouse or it was impracticable. The first lightships were located in the lower Chesapeake Bay (1820) and the most stations were in 1915 when there were 72 lightships manning 55 stations. The extra ships were used for relief. Lightships displayed lights at the tops of their mast(s) and in foggy areas sounded a bell or other fog signal such as a whistle, siren or horn. In 1921, lightships began being equipped with radio beacons. The last lightship was removed from the Nantucket station in 1984.

Six buttons available today from the Waterbury Button Company. The top left button depicts St. Augustine lighthouse. The buttons are available in multiple sizes. Five are available in 25 finishes, and the middle one in the bottom row is available in 16 finishes.

This image is of Ida Lewis; Lime Rock Lighthouse; date unknown. Women lighthouse keepers had no official uniform. There were over eighty female keepers. Most women obtained the position when their husband died or became incapacitated.

One to five keepers manned the light stations.

Keepers were paid a lower middle class wage. George Worthyleke, the first keeper, received 50£ ($250) a year. By today's standards that would be the equivalent of $16,000.

During the 19th century, a Head Keepers' annual pay ranged from $250 to $600, others were paid less. The exception was in the west, where keepers were paid $1,000 during the Gold Rush.

To see early uniforms, visit http://www.usecg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/USLHS_Uniform_Pictures.html


Satsuma style by Shirley Shaw. Marblehead (Ohio) lighthouse. BM: Shirley O1. Div III. NBS large. See www.dnr.state.oh.us/parks/parks/marblehead.htm
Brass Uniform - U.S. Lighthouse Service Button - Modern Waterbury backmark. Multiple sizes. BM: "Fine Quality" from the early 1900’s. NBS medium.

Brass button... notice the difference from previous with birds flying and windows in the light. Unable to confirm as a uniform button. Waterbury backmark. NBS Small.

Heavy Brass button. Shield in center depicting a lighthouse with a ship on each side. BM: FERMIN * LONDON * (We know nothing about this button, any Info would be appreciated.) NBS medium.

2-piece yellow metal with white metal collet. Lighthouse flying a flag, light rays emanate from the twinkle background light and two small ships. Note unique star on top. Steel back. Wire shank. Div I. NBS small.


Bright Cut Pewter with traces of the original blue tint. Imitation Cut Steel "light" is stamped from the back. Loop shank. Div I. NBS small.


Brass w/pearl back ground, small round pierced at top for "light" where pearl shows through. Shank looks like a glove shank. Div I. NBS small.

2-piece Thistles Celluloid. Stylized lighthouse with clouds, waves, birds, and rays. Div III. NBS large.

Painted Aluminum. BM: JHB. Div III. NBS medium.


Stamped yellow metal, white metal "sea" and ship in the distance. Loop shank. Div I. NBS small.


Convex 2-piece yellow metal with anchor and lighthouse with rays. Modern hump-type shank. Div III. NBS medium.


The most expensive lighthouse built in America is St. George Reef, off Crescent City, CA. It took ten years to construct (1882 - 1892) and cost $715,000.00. The Coast Guard abandoned it in 1972.

The tallest lighthouse is Cape Hatteras, NC (196 ft. built in 1872). The oldest existing lighthouse in America is Sandy Hook NJ, built in 1764 and is still in operation.
Lighthouses are constructed of wood, granite, brick, sandstone, steel, cast iron, reinforced concrete and one has an outer skin of aluminum.

Lighthouse towers were given special (painted) patterns—diamond designs, spirals, stripes, etc.—or unique colors to distinguish them from each other.

Did you know the Statue of Liberty is considered a lighthouse? It is unique because it is the only statue/monument type in the US. She was a gift to the U.S. from France in 1877, and was unveiled in 1886, shining her light 305 feet above the harbor. President Cleveland appointed the U.S. Lighthouse Board to be the Statue of Liberty's caretaker. The Liberty Lighthouse closed in 1902.

For the most part, lighthouses today are being absorbed by states (often parks), local governments, and restoration foundations, and are no longer part of the Coast Guard. Some are even personal homes.

The circle of life continues for the lighthouses, but often as an historic site of interest. A Roman lighthouse is still standing on the Cliffs of Dover in the UK that was constructed in 40 A.D.
In this country, the first fog signal (a cannon) was at the Boston Lighthouse. Other fog signals have been whistles, sirens, reed trumpets, bells, diaphone (BEEEEoooh) horns, and diaphragm (Brrrrrrrr) horns.

Links of interest regarding lighthouses you may enjoy exploring:
http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/h_lhindex.html
http://uslihs.org/


Japanned metal with Lighthouse on a bluff overlooking the water. Div III. NBS small.

Pewter – Ship approaching high cliff with a lighthouse. Div III. NBS medium.

Celluloid. Dark blue fading to pearly white. Celluloid shank. Same design as the button to the right. Div III. NBS large.

2-piece stamped brass with ship and lighthouse set in a shell shape. Loop Shank. Div I. NBS medium. This button is also found with a pad back (page 165, Button Classics, by Couse & Maple).

There were twelve lighthouses in the U.S. when we became a nation in 1776.

After 1852 the USLHE divided the country into eight service Districts, which eventually grew to nineteen. Today there are ten Districts. Each USLHE District was led by a District Inspector (a Naval Officer) in operational control. He ran the district in tandem with an engineer from the Army Corps of Engineers. (See the July issue for the Engineer's uniform button!) In 1910 civilians started replacing the military operators.

There were never more than about 850 lighthouses in operation at any one time, although about 1,500 were constructed in the US. For instance, the heyday of construction was about 1910, when 220 lighthouses were constructed on the U.S. shores of the Great Lakes.

Michigan has the most lighthouses (ninety), followed by Maine with eighty.

If you start looking, you'll find there are MANY lighthouse buttons. In fact, we couldn't fit them all into this article. Watch for “Lighthouse Buttons: Part II” in a future issue of the WRBA Territorial News.

---

**Introduction to U.S. Lighthouse Buttons**

**COLLECTING NAUTICAL ANTIQUES**

Portions of an article by Jim Ciafelin from the July 2001 issue. Reprinted by permission from Lighthouse Digest Magazine

Alphæus H. Albert, in his Record of American Uniform and Historical Buttons, classifies uniform buttons into 3 major types:

Type I is a one-piece button made by casting or molding with the shank being an integral part of the button itself. Buttons of this type are generally flat, with the image on a plain field without a border.

Type-II is a two-piece button invented in England in about 1813. The button is made of two pieces, a front shell upon which a design is “struck”, and a back plate to which the wire “eye” or loop is at-


Burwood. Pierced sew-thru. Div III. NBS medium. This button is found in multiple colors and all sizes.

Stamped brass. Div I. NBS small.


Carved pearl, two-piece with cut steel OME. Gilded background depicting a lighthouse and ship. Shown in Buttons by Epstein & Safro. Div I. NBS large.

Plate 3 from the 1928 "Regulations for Uniforms" of the US Lighthouse Service. Note that this was issued while the USLHS was under control of the Department of Commerce. Regulation buttons were approved in three sizes and were "to be triple gilt on brass."


tached, usually by brazing. The two parts are fastened together by rolling the edge of the front shell over the back plate. Buttons of this type are usually convex, gilt with the device on a plain or lined field. A border may be present or not.

Type III buttons were produced for Army staff officers and are similar to the two-piece button except that a separate narrow flat rim holds the front shell and back piece together. Buttons of this type are usually convex, gilt with the device on a plain or lined field. A border may be present or not.

A fourth variation was a reversible button. This type consisted of a gilt front shell with a black composition back. A threaded shank held the two pieces together. The button could be removed and reversed to show the black composition back, presumably to protect the gilt side when performing dirty or difficult work. This type was used by the Life-Saving Service for a short period during the early years and has become extremely rare and desirable.

Though button and field shapes were generally circular, the field on early Revenue Cutter designs was oval.

The first button design of the Revenue Cutter Service was of a one-piece design, but all subsequent designs were of a two-piece design. Buttons of the Lighthouse Establishment (and later Light-House Service), Life-Saving Service, and Coast Guard were of the two-piece design. Pictured are the three button designs used by the Lighthouse Service over the years. Note the variation in the first design with the addition of periods after the letters.

Most, though not all, buttons were marked on the back (backmarked) by the manufacturer with impressed letters indicating the company name and location (see illustration). These markings changed often and can be a useful aid when trying to establish a time period for a button's manufacture. There will be more on this in a later column.

By 1883 uniforms began to be prescribed and regulated by the Light-House Board. Keepers were now issued a complete uniform and were required to wear the proper uniform at all times. Prior to that time no uniform was required, though some keepers may have provided themselves with a suitable hat or coat. Lighthouse buttons may sometimes be dated by image design. More often than not documents and regulations of the day did not specifically mention changes in designs as the years went on, but sometimes overall designs were pictured. The 1884 regulation requiring uniforms mentioned only the prescribed buttons, but did not describe the design.

Some researchers feel that the intertwined USLHS design may have been used during this initial period, though we can't be sure. The Horstmann Bros. & Co. Light-House Service Equipment catalog for 1893 described the buttons as gold-plated and in three sizes: coat, jacket, and vest size. They described a black rubber button used for overcoats, however, they did not note design.

In the Light-House Service Uniform Regulations for 1893, regulation buttons are described as "...triple gilt on brass. The outer rim to be slightly raised, inside of which, arranged circularly, are to be the letters U. S. L. H. E. There will be three sizes of buttons: 1", 3/4", and 1/2". The medium (3/4") button to be worn on serge or flannel suits."

By 1907 when the new uniform regulations were issued, the button design had now changed to the later lighthouse design, triple gilt on brass but still in the same three sizes. Particularly subtle changes in design such as the addition of periods after initials (U.S.L.H.E.) or changes in border design were generally made without mention in the documents.

In addition to the uniform regulations and button references, another useful tool for dating insignia designs continues to be photos of the period. Knowing the date of the photo by the photographer, process, or other clues in the image can provide proof positive of the use of various insignia at the time. I do suspect though that in some cases tradition or sentiment may have led many keepers to carry on with some uniform practices in spite of regulation changes, and thus later photos may still show an earlier uniform style.