



Beacons of Light

With contributions by Stephanie Allen

U.S. Lighthouse Service

The U.S. Lighthouse Service was the first organization charged with the protection of the United States coastline. Before the colonies had even become a country, lighthouses protected ships from hazardous shores. The Lighthouse Service, along with four other federal agencies, formed what we know today as the U.S. Coast Guard.



Where in the World ...was the world's first lighthouse?

The Lighthouse at Alexandria

The tradition of lighthouse keeping began centuries ago. The lighthouse at Alexandria in Egypt was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Built in the third century BC, the lighthouse sat at the important meeting point of the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea, where it protected sailors entering the thriving port.



Explorers in the tenth century AD described the lighthouse, so we know today what it looked like. According to some sources, the lighthouse was the tallest building in the world when it was built. Historians and archaeologists estimate that the structure was approximately forty stories high.

Sostrates of Knidos designed the lighthouse. It was built on the island of Pharos, which soon lent its name to the building. The Pharos lighthouse used a system of mirrors and fire to reflect the warning light far out into the sea.

The lighthouse was in operation for hundreds of years. Earthquakes in the 1300s likely damaged the structure. It finally collapsed into the sea around 1326.

In 1994 a team of nautical archaeologists located several large blocks of stone on the seabed of the harbor. Some of the blocks came from buildings that were even older than the lighthouse. Scientists believe that these materials were recycled for use when the lighthouse was built.