

Did a Lighthouse Wreck the *John Milton*?

Professional seamen are familiar with NOAA's publication, *Notice to Mariners*. It warns of new hazards or changes to navigation aids which didn't appear on the latest charts. If only the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had existed in 1858. If only it had issued a notice about the new Shinnecock lighthouse. If only the captain of the sailing vessel *John Milton* had received the notice, then the crew and passengers of the 1445-ton ship wouldn't have died in freezing waters off the south shore in one of Long Island's worst maritime disasters. If only.

When you drive south through Hampton Bays towards the Ponquogue Bridge and the barrier beach, you pass the U.S. Coast Guard Shinnecock Station on the left just before the bridge. On this site in 1857, before the Coast Guard base existed, the Government erected a lighthouse. The tower was 160 feet high, built of red brick. Fueled by lard oil, the light shone through fine glass lenses imported from France and could be seen 20 miles at sea. The first keeper, John Hallock, and his two assistants lived in houses at the base of the tower. Coal for a stove and oil for the light were hoisted up outside the tower by heavy rope. The light began operating on January 1, 1858, a boon to the safety of mariners. Or so everyone thought.

