

HUDSON RIVER MARITIME MUSEUM  
**PILOT'S LOG 2000**

## CHILDREN HELPED SAVE A LIGHTHOUSE

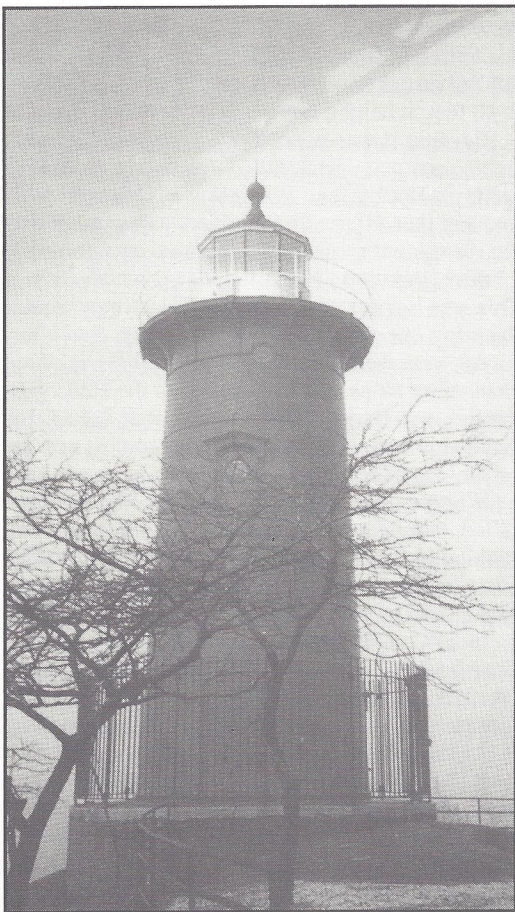
This is a true story of how children helped save a lighthouse. And it happened in New York City, one of the largest cities in the world, where buildings are sometimes fifty stories or more high.

But being tall or big is not always important. Often the small are those that make things happen.

So it was with the lighthouse on Jeffrey's Hook on the Hudson River in Upper Manhattan. For those who don't know, lighthouses have been around for at least two thousand two hundred years. At Alexandria, Egypt, a big four hundred foot tall light tower was called one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Yet, what we are talking about is something small.

The Little Red Lighthouse, for that is what the Jeffrey's Hook lighthouse was called, once was a light tower at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. One hundred twenty years ago, together with two other lights, it helped boats find their way into New York Harbor from ocean voyages. The 1880 iron tower was built not far from a keeper's home. The keeper's job was to "keep" the lights on at night and during storms to warn sailors where the dangers were.

Nineteen years later the lighthouse became one of the first in the nation to have electric lights in its main beacon, replacing the oil lamps. During World War I, the cast iron tower was torn down because it was in the direct line of guns from nearby Fort Hancock, which was there to protect the harbor entrance from



*The Little Red Lighthouse with the  
George Washington Bridge overhead.*

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possible enemy ships.

In 1921 the same lighthouse was, this time, erected at Jeffrey's Hook. As lighthouses go, it was very short. Imagine the cardboard tube in an empty roll of paper towels, then cut the tube in half. This is what a model of the lighthouse would look like.

It is only fourteen feet six inches wide, about the distance of three short adults lying down of the floor in a row, feet to head. The Little Red Lighthouse is 40 feet in height, not much taller than a two story house with an attic.

Because it was painted red, a favorite color of children, and was small, the lighthouse soon was called the Little Red Lighthouse, rather than by the Jeffrey's Hook name. It's light was also red and it would flash on for one second and then after a three second wait would flash again, sort of like a flashing red directional signal on the back of an automobile.

Also, there was a bell fog signal which rang once in every fifteen seconds. This was helpful to sailors who sometimes wouldn't see the flashing light in a thick fog, but who could hear the clang. And after a wait – clang again.

All went well for a while for this little lighthouse marking the shore and the channel for ships that were going up the Hudson River to Kingston, Albany and through the Barge Canal to the Great Lakes. But big people in government decided to build a great gray bridge almost over the Little Red Lighthouse. The bridge was necessary to get cars easily in and out of New York City.

When it was completed in 1931, the George Washington Bridge, as it is called, had lights on its highest points to warn airplanes of the tall steel towers sticking in the sky. These bridge lights could also be easily seen by boats traveling on the Hudson River. So there was no longer a need for the Little Red Lighthouse to assist sailors.

In 1942 a delightful book call "The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge" was written by Hildegard H. Smith with pictures painted by Lynd Ward. So popular is the story that the book, published by Harcourt, Brace and Company, is still available in bookstores after nearly sixty years.

As the story is told, the Little Red Lighthouse was sad and feeling sorry for itself, because the great big bridge was now helping boats going up and down the Hudson, and there was nothing for the lighthouse to do. Then one night there was a very thick fog. A tug boat coming down river couldn't see where it was going. The tug looked for the red flashing light of the lighthouse, but it was off. The tug listened for the bell, but it, too, was off. Lost, the tug crashed on the rocky shore.

With that the bridge in the book called out to the Little Red Lighthouse "Little brother, where are your lights?" The great gray bridge then explained that the lights from the Little Red Lighthouse were still needed. That made the lighthouse very happy and proud, for though it was little it was needed and had important work to do.

Children hearing this story realized that small things and small children are very important in the world of big things and big people. And, it made the children very happy and proud.

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But although the story made the red painted lighthouse at Jeffrey's Hook feel needed and important, the people who run the lighthouses, in order to save money, turned off the light in 1947 and left it up to the George Washington Bridge to guide the ships.

In 1951 the Coast Guard, which runs the lighthouses, said that the Little Red Lighthouse was for sale and whoever bought it would have to remove it because the New York City Parks Department wanted back the land it had leased for the site of the lighthouse.

Soon there was a Cry! Then a Shout! Increasing to a Roar, against even the thought that the Little Red Lighthouse would be removed. Leading the outcry were the children who had "The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge" read to them. Whatever happened to the idea that big is not always best? What about there is much to say about the importance of being small? Hadn't the children found comfort in knowing it's a small persons world too?

One four year old boy offered to buy the lighthouse. Letters to the editor of the big New York Times newspaper, including one from a noted doctor, protested the sale. Newspapers even printed editorials calling for the saving of the lighthouse from being torn down.

Those in public office knew that the children had the big people on their side for keeping the light. Even the Commissioner of Parks, who was out of the country, let it be known that when he returned he would find a way to save the Little Red Lighthouse and in fact, he did. The little people had won. The light was saved.

Yet, as the children soon found out, to save the lighthouse from being torn down was not enough. They watched year after year as the Little Red Lighthouse went unpainted and fell into disrepair. Maybe the little things and little people weren't important after all.

But they were. And they are. In the early 1980's, ten year old Matthew Goldin was driving in New York City with his father along the Hudson River. His father was in charge of the finances of that City. Matthew pointed out the Little Red Lighthouse he had read about. There and then son and father talked about how nice it would be to really fix up the Little Red Lighthouse and make it a place where everyone, the big folks included, could play and enjoy Jeffrey's Hook and the lighthouse.

Father undoubtedly loved his son for he arranged to have the City spend 1.4 million dollars to fix up the light and the surrounding area.

Matthew must be proud for what he and many children did to save the lighthouse. Happy too must be the author of this wonderful children's book.

Proudest of all is The Little Red Lighthouse which, though very small, each day reminds us all of the wonderful things that are small.

*Photo courtesy W. 181 St. Beautification Project  
and photographer Charlotte Fahn*