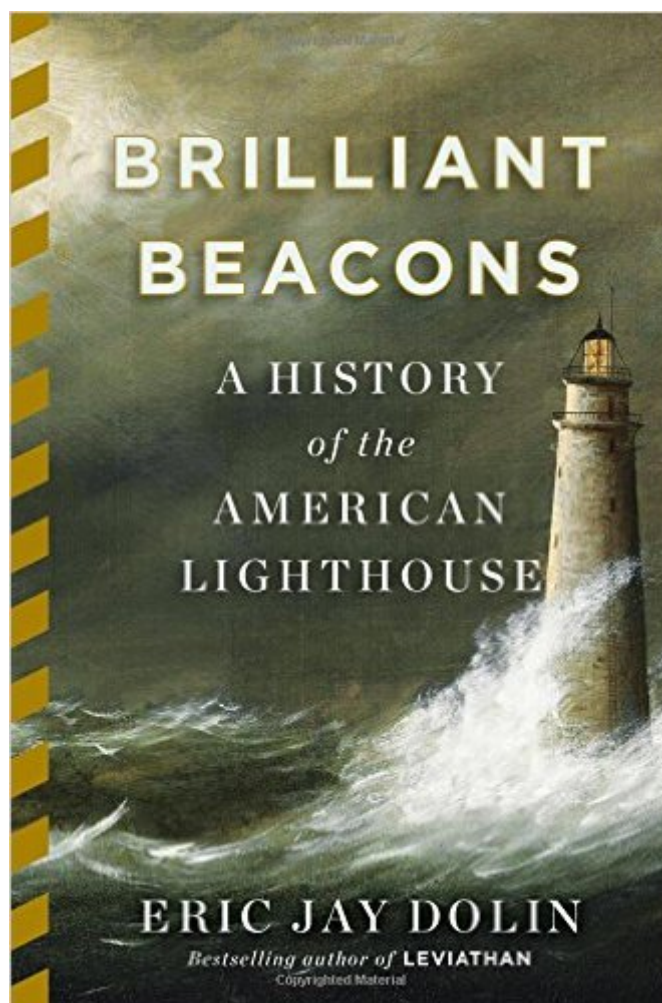


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# Brilliant Beacons: A History Of The American Lighthouse



## Synopsis

In a work rich in maritime lore and brimming with original historical detail, Eric Jay Dolin, the best-selling author of *Leviathan*, presents an epic history of American lighthouses, telling the story of America through the prism of its beloved coastal sentinels. Set against the backdrop of an expanding nation, *Brilliant Beacons* traces the evolution of America's lighthouse system from its earliest days, highlighting the political, military, and technological battles fought to illuminate the nation's hardscrabble coastlines. Beginning with "Boston Light," America's first lighthouse, Dolin shows how the story of America, from colony to regional backwater, to fledgling nation, and eventually to global industrial power, can be illustrated through its lighthouses. Even in the colonial era, the question of how best to solve the collective problem of lighting our ports, reefs, and coasts through a patchwork of private interests and independent localities telegraphed the great American debate over federalism and the role of a centralized government. As the nation expanded, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so too did the coastlines in need of illumination, from New England to the Gulf of Mexico, the Great Lakes, the Pacific Coast all the way to Alaska. In Dolin's hands we see how each of these beacons tell its own story of political squabbling, technological advancement, engineering marvel, and individual derring-do. In rollicking detail, Dolin treats readers to a memorable cast of characters, from the penny-pinching Treasury official Stephen Pleasonton, who hamstrung the country's efforts to adopt the revolutionary Fresnel lens, to the indomitable Katherine Walker, who presided so heroically over New York Harbor as keeper at Robbins Reef Lighthouse that she was hailed as a genuine New York City folk hero upon her death in 1931. He also animates American military history from the Revolution to the Civil War and presents tales both humorous and harrowing of soldiers, saboteurs, Civil War battles, ruthless egg collectors, and, most important, the lighthouse keepers themselves, men and women who often performed astonishing acts of heroism in carrying out their duties. In the modern world of GPS and satellite-monitored shipping lanes, *Brilliant Beacons* forms a poignant elegy for the bygone days of the lighthouse, a symbol of American ingenuity that served as both a warning and a sign of hope for generations of mariners; and it also shows how these sentinels have endured, retaining their vibrancy to the present day. Containing over 150 photographs and illustrations, and 8 pages in color, *Brilliant Beacons* vividly reframes America's history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book shines as brightly as its subject. In a compelling and lively narrative, Dolin tells the story of lighthouses in America. The history of the buildings is fascinating, as well as the technologies that helped ships to avoid disaster. The tale is about much more than buildings and devices. It is about the folks that served in lighthouses – the loneliness, the rigor, and the dedication involved. Some of the stories are chilling, as the lighthouse keepers rescued people from angry waters. You can, thanks to Dolin's deft touch and insistent research, feel the gale force winds as they pummeled lighthouses, and how in some cases, the lighthouse keepers managed to survive by various means. Women, as Dolin demonstrates, served as lighthouse keepers, with their husbands and on their own – often heroically. Like everything else, lighthouses were touched by politics and personalities, and Dolin is attentive to this as well. For anyone interested in the history of the lighthouse, in all of its aspects, this is a book to cherish.

This is, quite simply, the best book of its type ever written. In his typically engaging style, Eric Jay Dolin relates the broad history of American lighthouses from the earliest colonial lights to the Coast Guard era, from dedicated resident keepers to the new breed of keepers, the preservationists. There are many stories included that will be familiar to lighthouse buffs, but Dolin writes about them in a fresh way and often includes details that may have been omitted in previous accounts. There's much here about lighthouse technology and navigation, but it's the stories of the people that shine through, particularly the dedicated keepers and their families. This book is perfect for lighthouse buffs, who will certainly learn something new, and is especially recommended to anyone who might be developing a new interest in lighthouses -- "Brilliant Beacons" is a perfect primer.

This is another must read by the author of *Leviathan and the Witch's War*, *Fortune and Empire*. Eric Jay Dolin masterfully weaves the inception of America's lighthouses into the fabric of the civil and revolutionary wars and beyond. Exceptionally well researched and written, Mr. Dolin's latest work is the perfect read for anyone with an interest in American and maritime history.

A pleasant to read yet thorough recounting of all aspects of lighthouses, the need for them, the lives they saved, their history through storm and wars, and the lives and frequent heroics of their keepers. Plenty of interesting photos too. I recommend this book.

I was disappointed when I received this book to discover that it wasn't the book full of colorful lighthouse pictures I was expecting. It looked more like a 500 page novel. . I should have read the description better. I was preparing to send it back and just started looking at the content and before I knew it I had decided to keep it and read it. I thought I knew a fair amount about lighthouses, but this book tells you more than you'd ever need to know about lighthouses. For instance, he details the history of the different methods that the light itself was generated. At times it seemed overkill but then it all ties together to rekindle your interest. He does a great job of describing the politics that were involved in lighthouses especially in their early years. It is excellently written and you would never think lighthouses could have such an interesting story. It is almost like standing at the top of a lighthouse and observing US history take place below, as the author does a wonderful job of relating the history of American lighthouses into overall American history. This book resulted in me having a much greater appreciation of the significance of lighthouses and not just seeing them as interesting structures. There are also numerous interesting stories of the lighthouses themselves and also of the people involved with them. And there actually are many nice pictures, all in black and white, that fit in nicely with the story being told.. In hindsight I'm so glad I kept and read this book, there are plenty of other coffee table lighthouse books. This is a must read for any true lighthouse fan. Now when I look at all of those color pictures I'll see them in a different "light".

For lighthouse lovers and American history buffs, I can't imagine a more satisfying book than *Brilliant Beacons* . . . . Eric Jay Dolin's skillful writing draws the general reader, like me, into a subject that he treats with the critical respect demanded by the most erudite student of history. Dolin interweaves stories of individual personal drama with extensive historical detail, scientific explications, and elements of natural history. He has created a book of richly researched depth and breadth that is also a pleasure to read.

I have found that an excellent and entertaining way of becoming a bit educated on a subject I know nothing about is to find a talented author who has done extensive research on the subject and then compiled it into an interesting story. Brilliant Beacons does this superbly for lighthouses! The book begins with an Introduction that vividly describes the need for accurate navigational aids: a shipwreck in familiar waters caused by an unpublished change in a lighthouse's lighting pattern. We then learn many things about lighthouses: the shipwrecks that created the need for their locations; the amazing feats of engineering ingenuity and hardships of construction (especially in the 1700s and 1800s, before modern heavy equipment existed); the evolution of the types of lights/lenses used to generate the light and the fuels used; the administrative systems to manage them; the lifestyle of the keepers and their many stories of bravery in times of need--indeed, probably the most enduring impression the book repeatedly evokes is the dedication of the keepers to maintain their beacons in times of high distress, such as the female keeper whose foghorn malfunctioned, so she manually hit it with a hammer every 15 seconds for about 24 hours--and then did it again several days later after the repair (by a contractor) failed! The book concludes with the status of lighthouses today. All still in service are automated. Many decommissioned lighthouses have been sold to non-profit groups who have restored them, and some to private owners. In summary, a great read, especially during a seaside vacation.

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