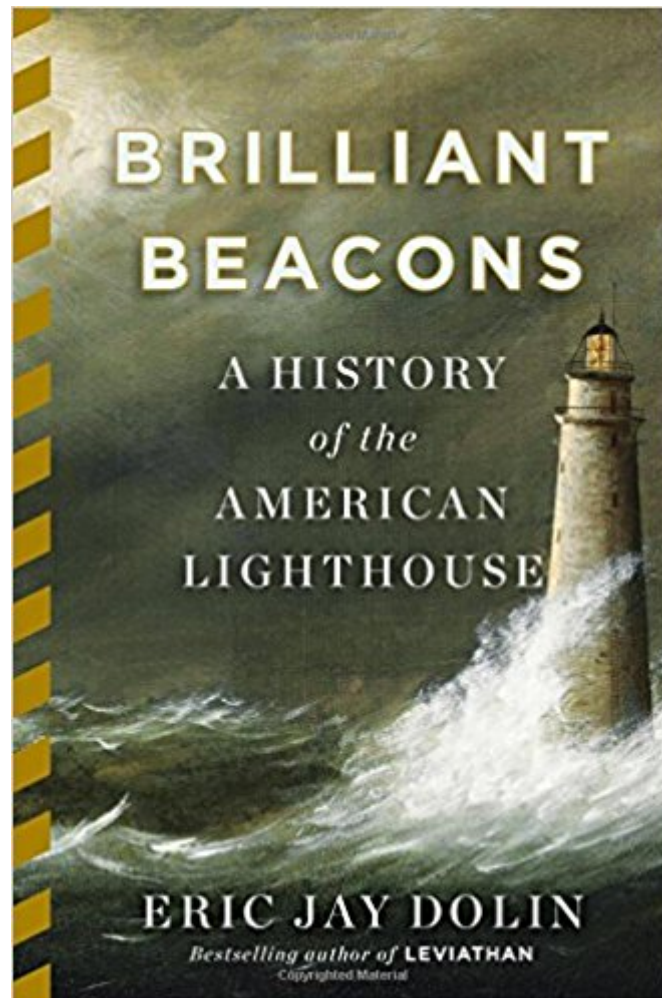




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# Brilliant Beacons: A History Of The American Lighthouse



## 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

"What Moby-Dick is to whales, Brilliant Beacons is to lighthouses--a transformative account of a familiar yet mystical subject. Eric Jay Dolin has devised a surprising and ingenious approach to our shared past and present. Having spent a lot of time by the sea over the years, I was enthralled by this book." (Laurence Bergreen, author of Columbus: The Four Voyages) "Eric Jay Dolin--whose superb books Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America and When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail are required reading for those interested in maritime history--has turned his gaze landward in his latest effort, Brilliant Beacons: A History of the American Lighthouse. Dolin guides us through the history of the American lighthouse, from the bureaucracy that built and managed them, to the men who tended them, through the wars that doused them, the science and engineering that lit them, and the storms that pummeled them. This magnificent compendium is a paean to the buildings that guided safe passage for the economic prosperity of a young nation with huge, dangerous coastlines. . . . Dolin is a brilliant researcher and seasoned writer, allowing this mostly chronological sweep moments to pause and eddy into all the stories bound to emerge from heroic engineering, isolation, and fortitude. . . . Part of the fun of Beacons is reading American history through this specifically coastal lens." (Ben Shattuck, The New Republic) "[Brilliant Beacons is] terrific. Dolin uses the history of American lighthouses to illuminate the history of America itself: As Colonies and uncharted territories became U.S. land, more coastline needed lighting." Entertainment Weekly "While changing lighthouse technology and bureaucratic stalemates are addressed in 'Brilliant Beacons: A History of

American Lighthouses, and the book also weighs in vividly on lighthouse keepers' lives and heroism. Wars are part of the picture. So are storms, including the deadly New England hurricane of 1938. The West Coast figures prominently, too, with terrific details on the building of lighthouses on Oregon's Tillamook Rock, San Francisco's Farallon Islands and Washington state's Cape Disappointment. The whole smartly researched package is delivered with wry wit and clarity. . . . [Dolin] has a fine eye for telling anecdotes, and his chapters on the conditions lighthouse keepers dealt with are the juiciest. Tsunamis, ice floes, wild geese attacks and military hostilities were among the most dramatic challenges they faced. Boredom and isolation posed more insidious threats. . . . While Dolin never loses focus on his central subject matter, he delivers a fascinating incidental history of the U.S. while he's at it. War and peace, economic boom and bust, technocratic muddles and political power-plays all come under his scrutiny, with illuminating, Fresnel-worthy results."

— Michael Upchurch, *Seattle Times*

— "While there have been a score of books on Maine lighthouses in the past few decades, this is by far the best national coverage since Francis Ross Holland's "American Lighthouses: An Illustrated History," from 1972. Dolin, whose earlier books include "Leviathan" (2007) and "When America First Met China" (2012), is a sure-handed researcher and a most enjoyable author. Though "Brilliant Beacons" updates and illuminates Ross Holland, don't ignore the latter. They are deserving of the same shelf."

— William David Barry, *Portland Press Herald*

"Hailing lighthouses as 'national treasures' that 'literally lit the way' for U.S. economic growth and maritime safety, independent historian Dolin (When America First Met China) establishes lighthouses and their keepers to be admirable and worth studying. . . . VERDICT Dolin delivers the most thorough and absorbing study of American lighthouses in over 40 years, since Francis Ross Holland Jr.'s America's Lighthouses, filling an essential niche for historians and lighthouse enthusiasts."

(Michael Rodriguez, *Library Journal*)

— "His material and handling overall are first-rate. It's a splendid history. . . . Dolin's book, which includes reference material on lighthouse organizations and museums, would be a good companion on any lighthouse excursion. (Tim Bross, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*)

— "A marvelously interesting and entertaining narrative...A skillful dramatist of such events, Dolin is as good a portraitist of characters who built and kept lighthouses...Dolin moves forward to chronicle the construction of numerous impressive towers in

wildly windswept, picturesque settings. These classic lighthouses, featured in the book's many illustrations, and the keepers' tales attached to them exert an ineffably romantic attraction richly conveyed in Dolin's admirable presentation." (Booklist (starred review)) "Historian and maritime expert Dolin . . . sheds light on the proverbial 'beacon in the night' in this meticulous look at American Lighthouses . . . In tracking social, political, cultural, and technological threads, he creates a fascinating picture of American life and its relationship with the sea over the centuries. . . . [an] engaging . . . rewarding read, and anyone studying lighthouses will find this an indispensable resource." (Publishers Weekly) "The author of other masterly works on key aspects of American history and growth (Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America, 2010, etc.), Dolin here presents a thoughtful, straightforward chronicle of the American lighthouse, from the earliest, completed in 1716 at Little Brewster, in Boston Harbor, as a harbinger of burgeoning Colonial maritime growth, to the death of the last civilian keeper at the Coney Island Lighthouse in 2003...A delightful journey with excellent sketches, renderings, and resources for museums and organizations." (Kirkus Reviews (starred review)) "While library shelves are weighted down with books on America's lighthouses, this new book by Eric Jay Dolin is a must-read for anyone interested in lighthouses or America's maritime history. . . . This history of American lighthouses is both engaging and enjoyable, whether for academics, who will not be disappointed in the thoroughness of the author's research, or for lighthouse history buffs who will enjoy its compelling narrative. It is highly recommended for both." (C. Douglas Kroll, Sea History Magazine) "Eric Jay Dolin tells the rich, colorful, and fascinating tale of these towers of light in his Brilliant Beacons. Dolin, acclaimed author of Leviathan, Fur, Fortune, and Empire, and When America First Met China, gives a wealth of information about the people who were involved in these beacons of safety: engineers, politicians, sea captains, and keepers . . . Not only well written, Brilliant Beacons also generously provides illustrations of lighthouses that throughout the ages have played such an important role in the development of the United States." (Iran R Buckhorn, Mystic Seaport Magazine) "Impressively researched and masterfully crafted, Brilliant Beacons reveals the high stakes and harrowing dangers of American lighthouses as no book before...immensely informative and enjoyable to read." (Theresa Levitt, author of A Short, Bright

Flash: Augustin Fresnel and the Birth of the Modern Lighthouse)â œA marvelously interesting and entertaining narrativeâ |A skillful dramatist of such events, Dolin is as good a portraitist of characters who built and kept lighthousesâ |Dolin moves forward to chronicle the construction of numerous impressive towers in wildly windswept, picturesque settings. These classic lighthouses, featured in the bookâ s many illustrations, and the keepersâ  tales attached to them exert an ineffably romantic attraction richly conveyed in Dolinâ s admirable presentation.â • - Booklist (starred review)â œThe author of other masterly works on key aspects of American history and growth (Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America, 2010, etc.), Dolin here presents a thoughtful, straightforward chronicle of the American lighthouse, from the earliest, completed in 1716 at Little Brewster, in Boston Harbor, as a harbinger of burgeoning Colonial maritime growth, to the death of the last civilian keeperâ •at the Coney Island Lighthouseâ •in 2003â |A delightful journey with excellent sketches, renderings, and resources for museums and organizations.â • - Kirkus Reviews (starred review)â œHere we have a full-bodied and fabulous history of one of America's most scenic and formative icons, the coastal beacons that defined a young nationâ s economic drive and determination to own the seas. Readers familiar with the irresistible narratives Dolin delivered in Leviathan or Fur, Fortune, and Empire can be confident that he has now done the same for the riveting history of America's lighthouses.â • - Rinker Buck, author of Flight of Passage and The Oregon Trailâ œEric Jay Dolin has crafted a master work of research and storytelling. Brilliant Beacons is a fascinating ride through the rich history of lighthouses as strategic prizes in war, sources of technological innovation, and inspiration for architectural ingenuity that combines grace and strength. This is a book for anyone who has gazed with awe upon the sea.â • - Brian Murphy, author of 81 Days Below Zeroâ œEric Jay Dolin looks beyond the postcard romance of lighthouses to reveal a vibrant and vital history. From shipwrecks and wartime raids to poetry, bird migration, and the physics of refraction, Brilliant Beacons is a fascinating, page-turning, and, yes, illuminating read.â • - Thor Hanson, author of The Triumph of Seeds and Feathersâ œBrilliant Beacons is the best history of American lighthouses ever written.â • - Jeremy Dâ Entremont, historian at the American Lighthouse Foundation, and author of numerous lighthouse booksâ œWhat better place to watch the United States taking shape than from its lighthouses? And what better author to take us to them than Eric Jay Dolin? With his usual narrative flair and wonderfully entertaining writing style, Dolin sheds all sorts of new light on American history.â • - Toby Lester, author of The Fourth Part of the World and Da Vinciâ s Ghostâ œThis meticulously researched and fascinating book isnâ t just for maritime history buffs but for all of us who appreciate little-known tales of days gone by.â • - Michael Tougias, author of A Storm Too Soon and coauthor of The Finest Hoursâ œNo other book

on the topic is as detailed and well written. Brilliant Beacons should be required reading for anyone interested in American history. • - Tim Harrison, founder and editor of Lighthouse Digest

In a work rich in maritime lore and brimming with original historical detail, Eric Jay Dolin, the bestselling 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 tells 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 importantly, 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 more than 150 photographs and illustrations, *Brilliant Beacons* vividly reframes America's history.

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.

This book is one of the most engaging and impressive works on American lighthouses, if not the most impressive, I have ever seen. This is a comprehensive volume detailing the history of lighthouses, keepers, architects, engineers, and natural history, telling the story of a nation while also honoring the individuals who guarded or constructed the lights. Lighthouse fans will delight in finding familiar names such as Ida Lewis and Marcus Hanna, with their stories told in an entirely new historical context. More importantly, you will hear many new stories, dating as far back as the Revolutionary and Civil wars, on up to more recent years. If you love history, lighthouses, the ocean, or exciting stories well-told, you will definitely enjoy this book.

Eric Dolin has written a very good book about the history of lighthouses, as well as America. I learned a great deal about the history of our country as Mr. Dolin worked it into the text. Dolin writes well and the book is fun to read. I have visited a few lighthouses through the years, but never knew as much about them as I learned from this book. The lighthouse keepers were a remarkable group and worked hard to help ships and mariners be safe. This is the third book I have read by Mr. Dolin and I look forward to reading his next one whenever it is published. The author does a wonderful job with non-fiction books.



I could not put this book down! Eric Jay Dolin is a master storyteller, and in *Brilliant Beacons* he has found one heck of a story to tell. Actually, there are many stories in the book - tales of wartime battles and intrigue, accounts of improbable engineering feats, and (my favorite) the human drama of courageous lighthouse keepers and their families. Dolin weaves it all together beautifully, engaging the reader at every turn. This book is a must-read for any lighthouse enthusiast, but also for anyone who enjoys American history and a good tale well-told.

There's a lot more to the history of lighthouses in America than anyone would ever suspect. Covers the people involved and the history of the lighthouses themselves very thoroughly.

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 love that I am learning so much U.S. history which I am just beginning to become interested in. We are lighthouse aficionados and our daughter's wedding showers were lighthouse themed. Easy read and a pleasure to read at any time of day.

A good read , covers everything lighthouse in USA. Would recommend. We see both Nubble and Boon lights from our seafront home.

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