

The Lighthouse Society owns five reels of microfilm containing letters from the commissioner of revenue and secretary of the treasury dating from 1789 to 1804. The letters all concern lighthouse matters and are all outgoing documents. While we do not have incoming correspondence relating to the outgoing correspondence, what we do have paints an interesting picture, although not complete.

During this early period (1789 – 1804), the government was expanding the aids to navigation system of our country. The glass used for the small panes in the lantern rooms was inferior and the optic used was a “spider,” or bucket, lamp. These lamps had multiple solid wicks placed in metal tubes. The oil in the lamp base was drawn up into the wicks by capillary action. In the early days, whale oil was the fuel of choice.

You will notice in some of the correspondence that there is some doubt about just what supplies the government is willing to furnish or pay for.

From the Ninth Act of Congress, which established the federal government’s control of our aids to navigation system, until 1820 the supervision of lighthouses and other navigational aids fluctuated within the Treasury Department between the secretary of the treasury and the commissioner of revenue.

The regional control of light stations was under the local collector of customs. He was paid 2 ½% of the cost of maintaining the lighthouses under his purview. In some of the letters you will also read some exasperation on the part of the commissioner of revenue in that he had a difficult time getting some local collectors to respond to his queries. The states just did not trust the federal government.

Tybee Island Lighthouse

On November 11, 1792, the following signed statement was made by the keeper of the Tybee Island Lighthouse concerning a fire that nearly destroyed the tower. It is written in his own word and with his own spelling.

On the 7th of November 1792 I was on Tibe [Tybee] and that day their came a number of gentlemen their, a part of which went up into the litehouse top and i went their myself i saw nothing that i conceived to be dangerous. The gentlemen all went away that day. i stayed and lodged in the first loft and on the 8th about two o'clock in the morning the Negro that trimed the lites went up to trim them and he discovered the lantern in flames. He cried out the lite house is on fier. i Jumped up and ran up Stairs into the lantern and saw that it was all on fier as far down as the lower part of the windows, but the flour and part of which the lamps stands on was not on fier but the lamps i could see canted against the side of the lanthorn. And that side i saw was burnt the most but the glass and sinders was fawling so thick and it was so very hot i was not able to tarry half a moment and i saw i was in vain to attempt to save it and in the meantime Cap Higgins and the negros Was after water but he saw on the outside he was in vain to Attemp to extinguish the feir

then Emedately we begun to carry out The materials that was in the lite house below and about day brake Their come on shore a number of men but too late for servis And about sun rise it was burnt down to the lower flower. This is an account to the best of my knowledge.

Personally appeared before me Jesse Tay, one of the Inspectors of the Customs who made oath that the contents of the foregoing statement are just and true.

[illegible] J.P.

In 1794, two years after the Tybee Island Lighthouse burned, the government was just getting around to replacing the structure. Tench Coxe, commissioner of revenue, wrote to John Habersham, superintendent of lighthouses for the Savannah, Georgia, district,

I have this day received official information that the President has been pleased to approve the proposal of John Armour for doing the mason’s work and that of Afrianus Van Duene for doing the carpenter’s work with the plain staircase for the light-house on Tybee Island. You will therefore cause the business to be dispatched with as much expedition as is consistent with good execution.

I am Sincerely
Very respectfully
Your most obdt. Servant
Tench Coxe

Mr. Wheeler of Philadelphia was awarded a contract to construct lanterns for the Carolina lighthouse at Cape Hatteras and Tybee Island, Georgia. For some time the commissioner was having trouble getting Wheeler to deliver the goods. The construction of several lighthouses was underway, with crews working and waiting for certain supplies and materials. Obviously transportation and communication was slow in those days.

Apparently the new Bald Head Lighthouse was ready for its lantern before the replacement lighthouse at Tybee Island, so Tybee’s lantern was sent to Bald Head Island. The commissioner of revenue wrote to Mr. Wheeler, who had several delays in constructing lighthouse lanterns, partially due to malaria and deaths in Philadelphia. But from reading various correspondence, it is apparent that Wheeler’s shop is not up to the task.

To Samuel Wheeler May 24, 1794

Sir:

I called at your house and shop on Saturday to see whether the second lantern for the Tybee Light-house was set on the place of that lately dispatched

Facing page: Tybee Island Lighthouse circa 1885. USLHS archive photo.



to Cape Fear [Bald Head]. It was truly painful to me to learn from your workmen, that no more work was done than an eighth side with a few small pieces for the work about the head [dome], and the uprights for the corners. Really, sir, I cannot refrain from saying that after making every allowance for you removing and for the late malady [malaria], your attention to this business has not been equal to what I had undertaken to promise it would be. I entreat you to put upon the lantern as many hands as can possible work upon it, and to dispatch it with the utmost expedition. Your own character and the public service demand extraordinary exertions.

T. Coxe

The Georgia senator has obviously been getting complaints about the delay in rebuilding the Tybee Island Lighthouse, and he has written to the commissioner of revenue. Although the lantern is not ready, as seen in the previous letter, the commissioner attempts to cover himself in the following response to the senator.

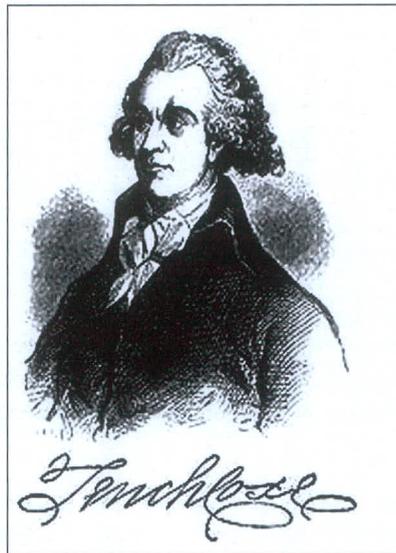
To Senator Jackson (James Jackson, Georgia senator 1793-1795)
June 7, 1794

I have the honor of your letter of Friday afternoon relative to the Tybee Lighthouse. In January 1793 the plan of repairs was adjusted at the Treasury with the difference of a large iron lantern in lieu of the small wooden lantern which was burnt. Instructions were given to proceed with dispatch. Information necessary to the ordering of the lantern was particularly designated as required, but not being received as soon as it might have been, the contract was made for the lantern in April 1793. The late malady occurred [malaria outbreak] and it interrupted the blacksmith. The delay of information from Georgia occasioned the lantern for Cape Fear to be out forward in the shop, so as lately to occasion the postponement of yours. The Georgia lantern is however now far advanced, and will soon be dispatched. That for Cape Fear [Bald Head] is gone. The carpenters and masons contract arrived in the time of the yellow fever. They have since been approved by the President and transmitted for execution and

I trust they are going on to the point when the iron lantern will be wanted, tho I am not so well advised from them as I could wish.

T. Coxe

One of the main procurement agents for lighthouse materials in the early days was Benjamin Lincoln, collector at Boston. In addition to being collector of customs for the Port of Boston and overseeing various light stations, he also acted as a procurement agent for whale oil and certain other materials. Tenche Coxe wrote the following two letters regarding materials for the new Tybee Island Lighthouse.



A signed portrait of Tenche Coxe circa 1780s. Wikimedia.org

To Benj. Lincoln July 15, 1794

Sir:

A box was received this day from the Custom House containing but one pane of glass. It's very much regretted that the three panes of glass had not come together as you supposed. It was desirable to have seen one of the best, one of the worst and one of medium quality. It is not known to which of these types the pane belongs.

It is reasonable to fear it is the best, as the manufacturer has put it with a great deal of attachment to American manufacturers. I should regret the remainder being inferior. The color is good and the thickness may do, but

it is not equal to the sample being unequal, many specks appear in the glass greater in number than those in common window glass. These appear like grains of sand not fused, or stony grit not capable of perfect vitrification.

A dwelling house [at the Tybee Island Light Station] is perfectly glazed from considerations of beauty and luxury, but the lantern of a light-house is important to the interests and lives of many.

T. Coxe

Until well into the 19th century, American-made glass was inferior to that of France. Contracts for the construction of a lighthouse often included the phrase "glazed with the best quality French glass."

To Benj. Lincoln Sept. 12, 1794

Sir:

Enclosed you will receive a bill of lading for a box containing the quantity of sheet copper requested in your letter of the 16th Ult. For the floor of the lantern. It is suggested that a netting around the lantern is not necessary in southern latitudes. Its chief design is to protect the glass from flights of birds in time of snow storms and as that occasion will not happen so far south, and as a netting is some obstruction to the display of light, it has been determined to make the trial without. The glass has been expected to have been arrived with you some time as it has been ordered from Boston to your place near two months.

It will be well to instruct the keeper of the lighthouse not to make the wicks too large, if they fill the pipes too close they will not burn well or give a good light. There must be a pipe or pipes to introduce air into the lower part of the lantern or the lamps will not burn or the smoke ascent to the ventilator.

T. Coxe

To Mr. Habersham, Collector of Customs, Savannah, Georgia
Sept. 18, 1794

Sir: Enclosed you will receive the bill of lading for the iron and copper work of the Tybee lantern and instructions from the black-smith and copper-smith to guide the workmen that may be employed in putting it up. In order to certainty, it might be well to erect it from a frame in Savannah, after which the workmen can more easily do it at Tybee. The sheet copper for covering

the floor of the lantern and the platform around it will be sent forward by some early opportunity after note of the quantity that will be necessary for the purpose is forwarded to this office. The glass will be sent as soon as it is known that it is ready for it.

It will be readily discovered that the hooks at the foot of the upright posts of the lantern frame are intended to be wrought into the wall at the time of building. It is expected that agreeably to information the progress of the wall has been arrested, when it arrived at that point, where the foot of the lantern is commenced. Should it have happened that the instructions have not arrived in time for that purpose? Those hooks must be necessarily introduced into the wall, by making an aperture for the purpose which will require to be well closed again.

The sheet copper is procured and sent by this opportunity as per bill of lading in package #12. If there is to be surplus it may well be to apply it to cover a part of the floor next below the lantern or any other place in danger of fire. The nails for fastening it are also sent.

T. Coxe

To The Secretary of Treasury

Sir:

I have the honor to enclose proposals from Mr. John McCauley for the copper work of the Tybee lantern. The terms are higher than in the case of that for Cape Fear [Bald Head Island] as material has risen considerably. No. 1 was his first proposal, the increased price of which induced me to make a second endeavor to procure propositions. By this step other proposals were obtained, and Mr. McCauley reconsidering the matter, sent #2 which was lower than any other which was offered.

The war in Europe and other circumstances have greatly advanced the price of metal, and workmanship is constantly rising here from the increase of the expenses of living and the prodigious increase of the capital employed in manufacturers and other domestic operations. [Sounds familiar, doesn't it?] I am satisfied that it will be difficult to procure as low a proposal from any other person.

T. Coxe



Looking up into the lens at Tybee Island Lighthouse. USLHS archive photo.

It is now three years since the Tybee Island Lighthouse was destroyed, and the local politicians and the commissioner of revenue are seething.

To Habersham, Collector of Customs,
Savannah, Georgia April 2, 1795

It is indispensable necessary to the reputation of the government here in Georgia, that the business of the Savannah light-house [Tybee Island] be completed. I fear we have all suffered and am sorry to observe, that the receipt of the lantern has never been acknowledged by you—Also, that you have for a long time given me no information. My circular letter of October 1792 [2 ½ years ago] remains unanswered by you alone of all the superintendents.

T. Coxe

To Habersham, Savannah, Georgia
July 20, 1795

Sir:

The form and condition of the light-house established at Savannah is the only one which is not known at the

Treasury. It is reported that it is not lighted, but it is only known by the report.

I requested in the most earnest manner, sir, that you will cause the necessary report from actual measurement, inspection and examination to be made to this office in reply to all the inquiries in the letter there from on the 23rd day of October 1792.

Tenche Coxe

To Habersham Sept. 26, 1795

Sir:

It appears that you have not rendered your accounts as superintendent of the Light House since the 30th day of September, 1793. I am sorry to observe that such delay has not occurred in any instance in the Light House Service. In a very inconvenient search among the offices, it is found this day that you have charged for the making of some chain in your account current of December 31, 1794. This course is quite irregular. It is proper that all the accounts of superintendents of Light Houses and other establishment for the direction of shipping should be sent with the requisite letter of information and remark to this office. After inspection they will go in course with certificates of the authorization to the accounting offices. You will be pleased to make up a regular quarterly form, an account of expenditures and receipts by you made in Light House Service from the 30th day of September 1793 to which time your accounts in that time have been rendered.

It is understood of Captain Howell of the revenue Cutter that you want some sinkers for the buoys. It is not known or remembered that any letter desiring such sinkers to be sent, has ever been received at this office. Nor has any reply been received to my letters about the buoys (not more than ten) which it was in contemplation to procure. Be pleased to send me a reply or copies of any letters since spring of 1794 which you may have written to me upon the subject of those buoys, the chains or sinkers thereof. I entreat your early attention to this matter. To save time I have ordered some sinkers to be made on the information of Captain Howell.

T. Coxe

To: Habersham October 5, 1795

Sir:

This letter goes per the Brigantine Hope Hulings, Cooper Thompson, Master, and enclosed is a bill of laden for 13 casks of the best winter Spermaceti oil for the use of the light house [Tybee Island] in the severest cold, also for one iron sinker of the weightiest kind intended for the large buoy which is to be placed on the shoal called the Knoll at or near the mouth of the Savannah River, opposite the light-house.

We are again reminded of the want of regular information respecting the branch of the public business under your superintendence, as answers to my Circular of July 1st from all my superintendents have been duly received except for yourself. It remains unnoticed by you.

My letter of the 20th of the same months requesting that you would cause the necessary steps to be taken for giving a full statement relative to the light-house business is also acknowledged. For the first of those there has been full time and constant conveyances offered by both land and water. The survey and examination requested by my letter of 1792 which is the only thing that requires a little time, could easily been effected. The report in answer to that letter, is yet necessary, and it is relied upon that you will procure measurement, inspection, etc. and transmit it. If anything should appear from it to be wanting to complete the Light-house established at Savannah [Tybee Island] the money can be obtained for it in the ensuing session of Congress.

T. Coxe

Things are not getting any better with Habersham for Commissioner Coxe. He does appear to be in frequent contact with Senator Jackson of Georgia.

On October 6, 1795, he writes:

Sir:

I have this moment the honor of your letter of the 26th Ultimo. Shortly after the transfer in August 1792 to this office of the general Superintendence of the Establishment for the direction of shipping, I wrote a letter in October 1792 requesting a statement of the condition, description, etc. of each of

them from their respective superintendents. [He was asking the collectors of customs of the various districts to advise him of the status of each of their light stations.] Not having received that required from Mr. Habersham, I am unable to tell you what sum he receives [The collectors are to receive 2 ½% of the cost of maintaining their light stations.] I shall repeat my application in consequence of your letter, tho without mentioning your name. When I have the pleasure to see you I will explain myself more fully on the point.

If you could hold a conversation with Mr. Habersham, which will be friendly to him and Captain Higgins, you will do a public service in delicately inducing him to attend immediately and completely to the business of the Establishment as pointed out in my letter.

T. Coxe

On the same day he writes to Habersham:

Sir:

I have received an application for information concerning the salary or allowance of Capt. Jessie Higgins, but am unable to say anything on the subject for want of information from you. It appears than in March, 1790 the late Secretary of the Treasury in the course of necessary duty reported to the President that no information concerning

the Light House Establishment was received from Georgia, tho inquiries had been made and he was unable to propose an arrangement. You will remember that I have made repeated inquiries and desired a report of particular questions sent in writing without having yet received it. I am put under the necessity of giving explanations to inquiries, which unavoidably carry the appearance of unpunctuality on your part.

I request that you will take up all my letters from October 25, 1792 to the present time [Oct. 1795] and furnish me with a complete answer to them all, on every point not duly noted by you.

I wish you would procure the removal of certain pine trees which are represented in your letter of the 5th of August, 1793 to interpret the view of the light house to the small coaster who are in constant danger of being caught upon the lee shore and are often very ill provided for such trials.

The inquiries made by the Secretary of Treasury were by circular to all the states. One letter went to Savannah and was of the 5th of October, 1789. Be pleased to note in your first letter to this office the date of all letters to you, or in your hands about the light-house and navigation, from the Treasury prior to October 1792.

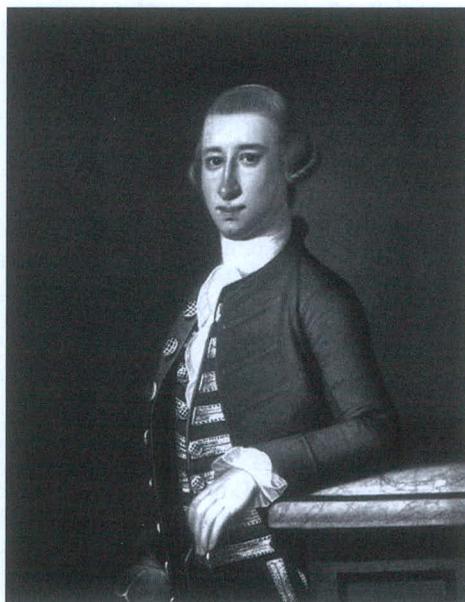
Tenche Coxe

A year letter the commissioner writes:

To Habersham 24 October 1796

Sir:

I wrote you on the 26 of September, 5 & 6 October, 21st November 1795 and July 7, 1796 concerning your long unsettled accounts and other matters essential to the orderly and beneficial execution of the Light-House Service, Some of these were of old standing from 1792 and others were of consequence of the time. I have not a single reply to any of these, but one letter of November 1795 mentioning the ship wreck of a supply vessel and promising to send a report of what was required of you. The desire of preserving harmony among the public officers, friendly dispositions toward you of which I do not wish to make excessive professions a regard to my own character as a public officer, and a sense of duty to the United States have impelled me to another application to your brother. The



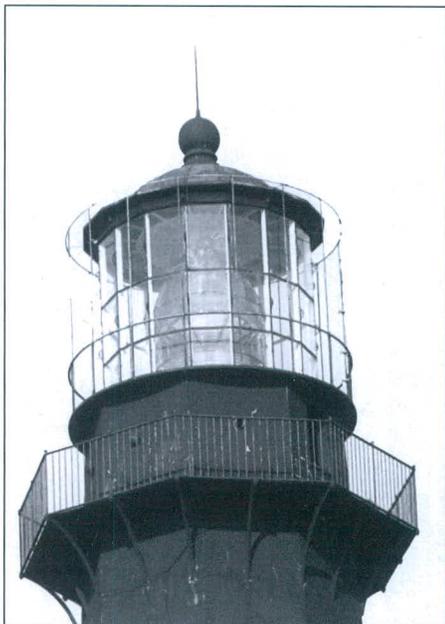
Portrait of John Habersham. Wikimedia.org

interview was as harmonious as it was truly painful to both of us; it is in your power to relieve [illegible]

Excuse me for taking a definitive step upon this subject which I cannot justify myself in omitting. We are now at the 24th of October. I am obliged to explicitly require of you all your accounts and answers to all my letters from October 1792 to July 1796, on or before the 1st day of January next.

To prevent the miscarriage of this requisition I shall send you three copies of it by land and water, and I rely upon your punctual attention.

T. Coxe



Lantern of the Tybee Island Lighthouse circa 1990. USLHS archive photo.

To Habersham December 29, 1796

Sir:

I have this morning received your original letter of the 7th Inst. With the accounts which will be forthwith inspected in this office.

I am truly sorry for the melancholy cause which has obliged you to postpone a little the report on the lighthouse and the remaining accounts to September 30, 1796 as it will be agreeable to have a complete adjustment to the end of the year and the accounts are very limited, you will no doubt send on by the first of February the quarterly account to the last of this month. I have had for some time on my hands the ab-

stracts or returns of some of the states down to the last quarter day, tho one year of any one of them is equal to ten years of the light-house accounts of any establishment of the union.

I am with great regard
Your most obedient servant
Tench Coxe

To Habersham February 2, 1797

In my last [correspondence] I made a few remarks on your account of 31st December 1794. The remaining accounts received from you are now before me.

The various charges for transporting and placing and putting up of the Lantern [on the Tybee Lighthouse] are very high compared with anything hitherto occurring.

In the account sent the 31st Dec. 1794, for which I look back for this object only, the following charges in relation to the lantern.

1. The hiring of boat and hands for going down with lantern	\$30.75
2. Hiring of eight negroes of assisting at the lantern	8.50
[subtotal]	\$39.25
In the account for the quarter ending 31 March, 1795 are the following charges in relation to the same object.	
3. To J. Calder & Js. Randall who appear to have been employed to putting up the lantern 8 1/2 days ea.	17.61
4. L. Patten - 42 days to fix the same \$2 1/4 a day	94.50
5. I Van Peltt 44 days (same)	99.00
6. J. Ritter 44 days (same) \$2 a day	88.00
7. C. Brown 40 days (same)	80.00
[subtotal]	\$379.11
[total]	\$418.36

In the account for the quarter ending 30 June 1795 the following charges for the Lantern are made.

8. Jno. Armour 14 days for putting up the lantern @ \$3 a day	42.00
9. T Myers 14 days @ \$2 a day	28.00
[subtotal]	\$70.00
10. Two apprentices 14 days @ \$1 1/4	35.00
11. Two negro brick layers 14 days same	35.00
12. Five negro laborers 14 days \$1 day	70.00
[total]	\$210.00

In the account for the quarter ending 31 December 1795

John Herb, Blacksmith is paid for

ten days for raising The Lantern @ \$4 a day 40.00

And for 20 days coppering it and putting it together 80.00

[subtotal] \$120.00

Total \$748.36

These charges appear to be very many and on the aggregate very great. It was supposed that a couple of our common Blacksmiths would in the course of one week would put the lantern together and see to placing it on the lighthouse. These with the aid of a few laborers and the masons in performing their own work at the lighthouse were presumed to be sufficient to perform the service. The Bricklayers contract obliged him to all such aid as he could give. The lantern went from hence completely prepared by the Blacksmith and Coppersmith in all respects as the lanterns sent to other places and such charges have not accrued under similar circumstances. The rate, too, of the persons employed as above mentioned is Much higher than any mechanics or tradesmen at any other place.

In the account last mentioned 1,200 bricks are charged at 144 dollars equal to \$12 per hundred. This is an evident mistake of hundreds for thousands. It is moreover to observe that the bricks were to be found by Mr. Armour as per his proposals approved by the President, of which a copy is enclosed. In passing your current account into the auditors office for a regular settlement a copy of the agreement with John Armour for taking down the top of the light house [the old burned lantern] and for which he charges 128 57/100 dollars, should have been transmitted. This would appear the more necessary because he charges independent of this for his own time in breaking joist holes and filling up between them and repairing places damaged by the fire for 14 days at 2 dollars per day. That of his apprentice 56 days at 1 dollar per day and laborer at 3/4 dollars per day and because he makes further charge of 50 dollars for being obliged to take down and rebuild for more than was at first thought necessary, it is not understood why he and his apprentices should receive so much per day for assisting in putting up the Lantern than they did at the masons work—it will be agreeable to receive explanations on these points....Taking all the expenses of putting up together they amount to

3/5 of sixty percent of the cost of the Lantern itself, tho of iron and one of the best in the United States.

The quantity of candlewick charged in the account current for the quarter ending 30 September 1795 being 130 lbs. is more than could be necessary for the consumption of your Light house for a long time to come. It will be best to lay in a year's supply and no more. About 15 lbs. per annum for the Light House on the Delaware and the same in New York, which are two of the largest lanterns and of the best lighted on our coast where the nights are rather longer than in your latitude.

T. Coxe

To Habersham March 31, 1797

Sir:

Your quarterly account for the Light-house Service have only been received up to the 31st December 1796, which is as late as possible. It is above three months since I desired your accounts to September and afterwards, to December 1st.

This office is reprehensible and it

cannot be expected that it will be silently enured for the unpunctualities of others. Besides this I still remain without the report required by my letter of 1792 [!]. I have been obliged to give your brother and myself the pain of another application in consequence of your utter neglect of it. Suffer me to observe that a brother and a friend ought not to be suffered to undergo the embarrassment and pain of such an interview. Besides the prosperity of your port and your own interests are affected by the judicious management and improvement of the lights and other guides for the direction of shipping. The public revenue, the property of your fellow citizens and of foreigners, nay the lives of many persons, are deeply concerned.

If considerations like these do not move us, what can produce care, punctuality and attention?

This letter will reach you in ten days, ten more will be sufficient to do the required duties and twenty days will bring your reply. Therefor if the day of the meeting of the Congress shall arrive, without satisfactory communication

from you, I shall expect you will excuse my taking, with regret, the first convenient season [session?] to represent the impediments to the Light House Service which arrive from your department.

I am with esteem and regard...T. Coxe

To Habersham July 24, 1797

Enclosed is a description for an oil vault such as built at Capes Henry and Henlopen, Sandy Hook, Seguin Island, etc. It will be proper to have one constructed at Tybee on the public land. The vat can be made and sent from hence upon lower terms, it is supposed, than it will cost in Savannah. You will be pleased, however, to take measures among your most faithful, judicious and reasonable masons to ascertain at what price they will contract for building of brick or stone, with a good shed for covering an oil vat upon the plan and dimensions described in the enclosed paper. You will be pleased also to ascertain whether you can procure to be made in Savannah nine cisterns

of 200 gallons each for holding the oil of stout plank and well hooped with iron, with good bottoms, open at the heads or tops.

The cost of these, if they can be made in Georgia, to be commensurate.

I will thank you for seasonable attention for these two objects and for a reply to my letter of 2 February 1797 on the subject of your accounts. They are suspended for your answer in the accounting offices.

I beg to be informed whether you have procured to have the trees cut down which interrupted the light.



Aerial photograph of the Tybee Island Light Station, 1967. U.S. Coast Guard photo.