

The Gay Head Light, Early Days



The first lighthouse on this site was constructed in 1799. President John Adams approved the construction of an eight-sided wooden tower, a keeper's cottage and outbuildings. The light rose about 50 feet above the cliffs and was fueled by sperm whale oil. In 1844, the tower was moved back 75 feet due to erosion of the cliffs.

On Monday, at four o'clock, Congress brot the longest and most important session to a close, which has been held under the present government.

In the course of the sitting, the Senate sent down to the House of Representatives for concurrence, a new bill in addition to and to amend the act for suspending the commercial intercourse between the United States and France, and the dependencies thereof. This bill proposed to repeal that part of the former law, which requires the owner and master of a vessel to be bound in the full value of the vessel and cargo, and two sureties each in half the sum, for the proper employment of a vessel when cleared out, and proposed in its stead that the bond should be for the value of the ship alone, and for a sum not less than 1000 dollars each nor more than 10,000, at the discretion of the Collector. On motion of Mr. S. SMITH, the bill was amended, to make the bond to be given one third part of the value of the vessel and cargo. This was agreed to by the Senate with a small amendment.

The Senate postponed till next session of Congress, the bill further to amend the Stamp Act; the bill for altering the time of making entry of stills; and the bill for the relief of Reuben Smith and Nathan Strong. They also resolved that the bill respecting balances due from the Debtor States, should not pass.

The President of the United States approved and signed the following acts:

An act for the relief of sick and disabled seamen;

An act farther to suspend the duty on Snuff, &c.

An act for erecting a Light-house at Gay-head, and for placing certain buoys.

An act making further appropriations for the Naval Armament.

An act to authorize the President to borrow money for the public service.

An act to augment the Army of the United States.

An act respecting the judicial Courts of the United States.

An act making additional compensation to the Door-Keepers of the Senate and House of Representatives, for their services during the present session.

An act making certain appropriations, and authorizing the President to negotiate a loan in anticipation of the Direct Tax.

An act making certain additional appropriations for the year 1793.

An act for relief of Ely Williams.

An act making additional compensation to the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives, and their Clerks, for their services during the present session.

An act in addition to, and to amend the act for suspending the Commercial Intercourse between the United States and France, and the dependencies thereof.



Fresnel lens

An 1852 report on lighthouses in the United States ranked Gay Head Light as the ninth most important seacoast light, the highest rank of any light north of New York. The light's importance to maritime traffic led to the installation of one of the first Fresnel lenses in the U.S., in 1856. Steamship excursions from Oak Bluffs and Vineyard Haven brought tourists to a dock below the cliffs, where the passengers were met with oxcarts to bring them up to the lighthouse grounds.