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ON THE MAP; A Lighthouse That Was a Beacon for Wireless Communication

by Margo Nash - April 16, 2000

April 24 is International Marconi Day, when amateur radio operators around the world celebrate the achievements of Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the wireless telegraph, by exchanging messages for 24 hours. One of the stations participating will be in the Navesink Light Station in Highlands, now known as the Twin Lights State Historic Site. In 1899, Marconi used the lighthouse to prove to America just how useful wireless telegraphy could be. He put an antenna near the northwest tower to telegraph reports of the return of Admiral George Dewey and his fleet from the Battle of Manila Bay on Sept. 30, and the progress of the America's Cup race offshore in October. In 1900, he set up a full-time telegraph station there, and it stayed in operation until 1907. The lighthouse was decommissioned by the Coast Guard in 1949. Thomas Laverty of the park service spoke about the lighthouse, where he has lived for 15 years.

Q. Why did Marconi choose the lighthouse for his antenna?

A. Because of the height. The America's Cup races basically went from the tip of Sandy Hook out about 12 miles into the ocean around the Sandy Hook Light Ship and back again. The hill here at Navesink had an excellent unobstructed view of the race course, and the early wireless were what they call line-of-sight radio waves. If the two ends couldn't see the other, electronically they couldn't communicate. So they needed to put the antenna on a high hill that had a direct visual line with the boat that Marconi was on.

Q. What was the station used for?

A. It was a ship-to-shore station that carried Marconi wireless telegraph signals to ships and received the signals they sent, relaying them wherever they needed to go, whether it was to a mercantile interest in New York City or to a newspaper or to a private person.

Q. Do Marconi descendants ever come to Twin Lights?

A. Unfortunately, one of our primary contacts, Marconi's daughter, Giola Marconi Braga, passed away a couple of years ago. She ran the Marconi Foundation in Brooklyn and she lived up in Saddle Brook and was quite familiar with our society. Marconi's other daughter, Electra, lives in Europe. We have had no contact with her.

Q. What can visitors to Twin Lights expect to see there about Marconi?

A. We have an outdoor exhibit area, and they can see the spot next to the north tower where he operated this commercial station until 1907. You can see the concrete pads where the antenna was, and we have a picture of the antenna. Inside, we have an entire case devoted to Marconi showing a replica of some of the equipment he used in the 1899 demonstrations. You can also climb up to the north tower, which offers an excellent panoramic view. On a clear day you can see New York City very well and you can see 22 miles out to the horizon.

Q. In a way, aren't you the latest of the lighthouse keepers?

A. I live in the lighthouse, and I take care of it very much the way the lighthouse keepers would. But they made sure that the light was shining out over the ocean. My job is to make sure it's in good shape so visitors can learn about its history. You know, when you stand in front of the lighthouse on a foggy day all the 21st century stuff that you normally see is blocked out. Once I was standing out there -- I think it was the Columbus quincennial -- and out of the fog came this massive sailing ship with its sails full mast, barreling along, and at that moment I felt like I was standing there a hundred years earlier, watching what all the lighthouse keepers would have seen. The irony is that the work Marconi did put an end to the need for lighthouses.