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## George Gordon Meade and Barnegat Lighthouse

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# George Gordon Meade and Barnegat Lighthouse

## **Abstract**

Tucked away off the coast of central New Jersey on the small stretch of land called Long Beach Island is a little piece of Civil War history. It is here that a largely unknown monument highlights a figure so well known by those four hours away in the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. I have been visiting Long Beach Island since I was young, and yet had no knowledge of this Civil War connection that had been staring me in the face until my mother enthusiastically shouted to me, “Brianna! Gettysburg!” As I climbed the sandy hill towards a monument somewhat removed from the beaten path, I was shocked at what the monument was for, but more importantly, at the man to whom it was dedicated. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, New Jersey, Monument

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### George Gordon Meade and Barnegat Lighthouse

*October 22, 2014*

*by Brianna Kirk '15*

Tucked away off the coast of central New Jersey on the small stretch of land called Long Beach Island is a little piece of Civil War history. It is here that a largely unknown monument highlights a figure so well known by those four hours away in the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. I have been visiting Long Beach Island since I was young, and yet had no knowledge of this Civil War connection that had been staring me

in the face until my mother enthusiastically shouted to me, “Brianna! Gettysburg!” As I climbed the sandy hill towards a monument somewhat removed from the beaten path, I was shocked at what the monument was for, but more importantly, at the man to whom it was dedicated.



George Meade monument, Long Beach Island.  
Image courtesy of Susan Kirk.

George Gordon Meade, the commander of the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg, has another layer to his life that is often overlooked in the shadow of his Civil War fame. Many Americans, myself included, know little about Meade's life before Gettysburg. It surprised me to learn that he had been an active engineer who took up the daunting tasks of planning and building lighthouses on the New Jersey and Florida coasts. An 1835 graduate of West Point, Meade's aspirations to become an engineer were put on hold when he was sent to Florida to fight the Seminole Indians. He resigned from the Army shortly after and pursued survey engineering, working on railways and the United States/Texas border until 1840.

In 1840, Meade married and then decided to reenlist in the Army, where he was assigned to the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers with the responsibilities of designing and building lighthouses around the Delaware Bay and the Florida Reef area. He worked with

Hartman Bache, a well-known engineer at the time, to construct lighthouses in the budding field of marine engineering, perfecting his skills through the construction around 1850 of a screwpile lighthouse called the Brandywine Shoal Light, west of Cape May, New Jersey. After overseeing the construction of several additional lighthouses, Meade's attention finally turned to Long Beach Island.

The Island required Meade's skills and knowledge for a multiple reasons, the chief being that the lighthouse served as an important point for vessels travelling to and from New York along the New Jersey coastline. Due to unpredictable currents and ever-changing sandbars, sailors needed a reliable lighthouse to guide them, and George Meade would

be the man to construct it. He began in late 1855 with the construction plans, and started work in late 1856. In November 1857 the original lighthouse collapsed into the water, causing Meade to relocate the new structure further inland. Barnegat Lighthouse was ultimately completed in late 1858 and commissioned on 1 January 1859, the same day that it was first lit.



Barnegat Lighthouse. Image courtesy of Susan Kirk.

Civil War career. But by doing so, by exploring who Meade was before he became a Gettysburg victor, historians get a glimpse at a complex, intricate, and three-dimensional figure, gaining an exceptional and rare perspective on a famous man that brings his character to life.

The story of Meade and Barnegat Lighthouse, although perhaps not as historically significant as his career on the battlefield, is a lesser known one that offers a different glimpse into the life of this Gettysburg hero. Memorialized for his leadership against Robert E. Lee in the early days of July 1863, Meade's memory has largely been defined by his Gettysburg service; historians and enthusiasts alike

have seldom ventured to explore Meade before his



Author with monument plaque, which reads:

"Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade built this lighthouse in 1858. During the Civil War he commanded the Army of the Potomac, from Gettysburg to Appomattox (1863-1865) under Lt. Gen. U.S. Grant."

**Sources:**

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Barnegat Lighthouse State Park:

<http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/parks/barnlig.html>

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2014/10/22/george-gordon-meade-and-barnegat-lighthouse/>