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Fort Washington

Light Station

"Should proper works be erected here," wrote George Washington to the secretary of the navy in 1798 of the fort which was later to bear his name, "it would not be in the power of all the navies of Europe to pass that place." Nevertheless, on August 27, 1814, five years after it was built, the British did pass the fort, then called Warburton. The fort is 16 miles southeast of Washington, and its commanding officer, Captain S. T. Dyson, destroyed it rather than have it fall into the hands of the British, who sailed up the Potomac to Alexandria a few days after their land forces had captured Washington. It was rebuilt in the next decade, first under the direction of Pierre L'Enfant, and later under Colonel Walker K. Armistead. It was essentially completed in 1824 and has been little altered since.

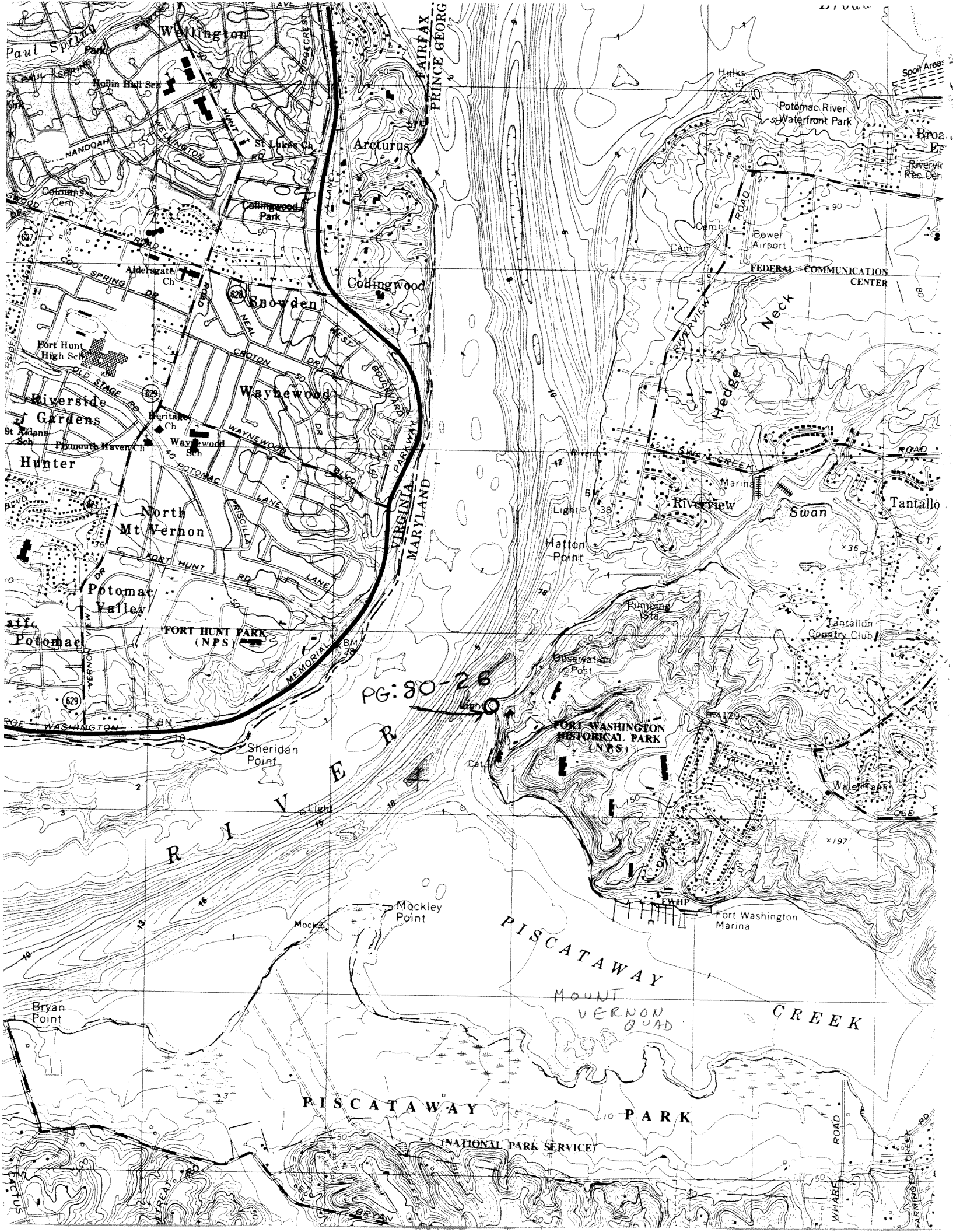
In 1856 the secretary of the Treasury, James Guthry, wrote to the Lighthouse Board: "I enclose herewith a letter from the Secretary of War . . . granting permission to erect a small light at or near the landing at Fort Washington, on the Government land, on condition that the light shall be placed on the wharf, and not within any of the fortifications, and that the keeper shall be subordinate to the military command of the post and public ground, in all that relates to police and discipline." The following year a cast-iron column 18.5 feet high with a small light on top was erected at the wharf under the fort.

Complaints about the inadequacy of the light were soon made, and in 1870 a small tower was built and a sixth-order Fresnel lens installed. This was really the first "lighthouse" at Fort Washington.

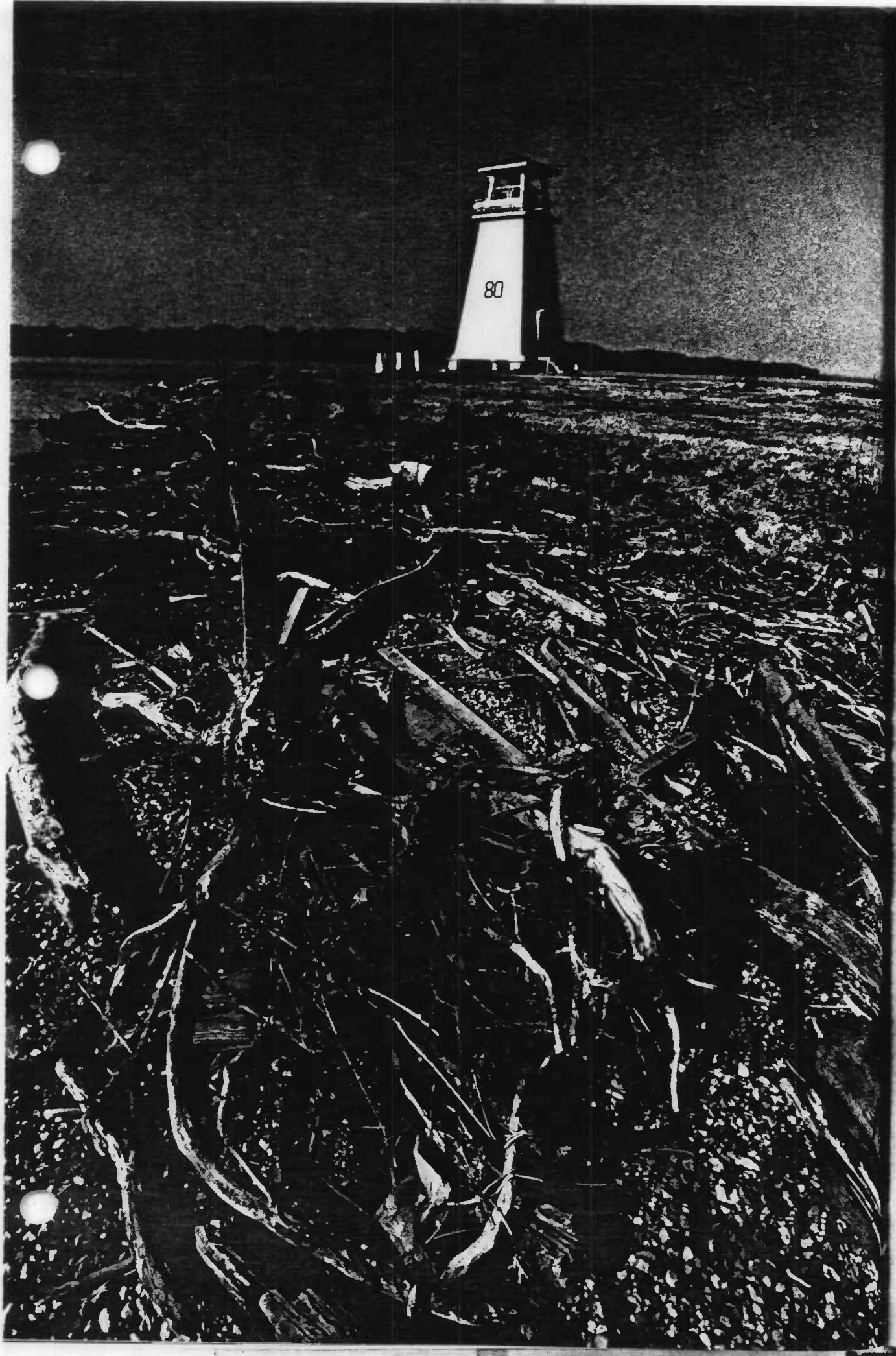
The building of several sheds and boathouses on the wharf eventually obstructed the light, and it was decided to use the fog bell tower, which stood closer toward the river, as the base for a new one. Even so, the bell tower had to be raised several feet for the light to be seen from up- or downriver. The old lighthouse tower was torn down in 1901. The keeper's house, which was built in 1884 after 25 years of requests, was also torn down after the light was automated. So the 32-foot fog bell tower became a lighthouse tower, and the fog bell, which sounds continuously from the middle of August through the middle of May, now shares the small space available with the Fresnel lens.

The fort itself was abandoned in 1872 but reactivated in 1896, when it became headquarters for the Defenses of the Potomac. In 1921 it became the home of the 12th Infantry and in 1939 was transferred to the Department of the Interior. Since 1946 it has been administered by the National Park Service and is open to the public year round.

de Gast, Robert
1973 the Lighthouses of the Chesapeake. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. pp 50-53



Wellington
Paul Spring Park
Hollin Hall Sch
St Lukes Ch
Arcturus
FAIRFAX
PRINCE GEORG
Potomac River Waterfront Park
Hulks
Spoil Areas
Colmans Cem
Collingwood Park
Bower Airport
FEDERAL COMMUNICATION CENTER
Aldersgate Ch
Collingwood
Snowden
Fort Hunt High Sch
Hedge Neck
Waynewood
Riverside Gardens
Heritage Ch
Waynewood Sch
Plymouth Haven Ch
Hunter
North Mt Vernon
Riverview
Swan
Tantallo
Hatton Point
VIRGINIA
MARYLAND
Potomac Valley
Potomac
FORT HUNT PARK (NPS)
Pumping Sta
Tantallon Country Club
Observation Post
PG: 80-26
FORT WASHINGTON HISTORICAL PARK (NPS)
Sheridan Point
RIVER
Water Tank
Mockley Point
Fort Washington Marina
PISCATAWAY CREEK
MOUNT VERNON QUAD
Bryan Point
PISCATAWAY PARK
(NATIONAL PARK SERVICE)



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de Gast, 1973

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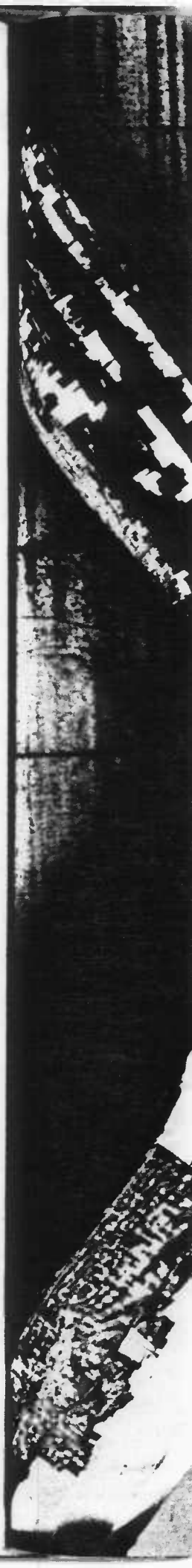
Looking south toward Piscataway Creek.

Mortise and tenon cross-bracing inside the tower.



de Gast, 1973

n cross-bracing inside

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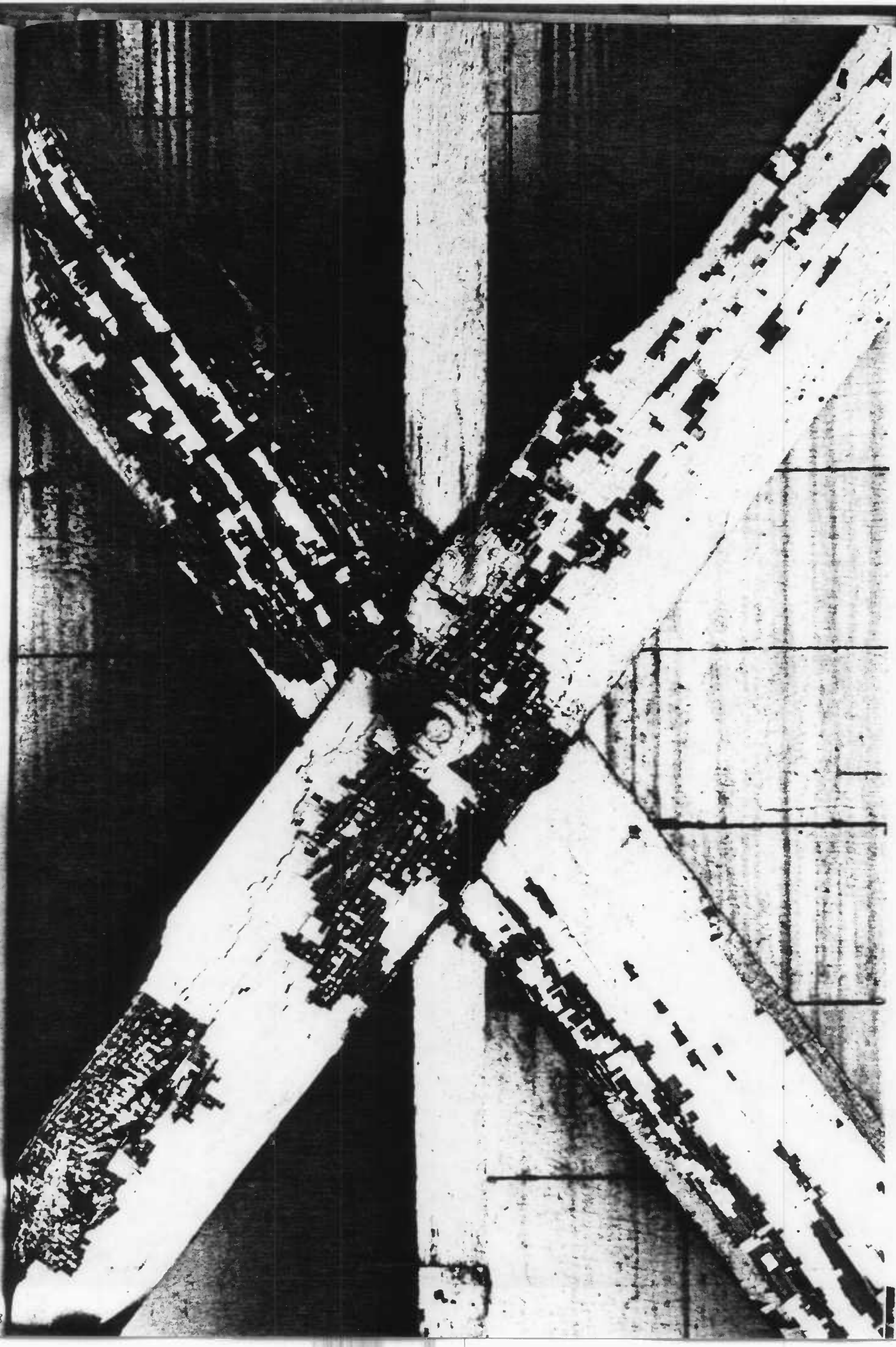
Mortise and tenon cross-bracing inside the tower.



de Gast, 1973

ce Georges County

Fort Washington Light

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A. Aubrey Bodine

SUNDAY SUN MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 14, 1962

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SUNDAY SUN MAGAZINE MAY 14 1961
COLOR PHOTO CONTEST)

A 1907 view of the wharf at Fort Washington, on the Potomac in Prince Georges county. This also came from Mr. Sanders.