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In a lighthouse, the source of light is called the "lamp" (whether electric or fueled by oil) and the concentration of the light is by the "lens" or "optic". Originally lit by open fires and later candles, the Argand hollow wick lamp and parabolic reflector were developed around 1781 in Europe and deployed on the Cordouan lighthouse in France in 1782, with a rotating element being added in 1790.

Before modern strobe lights, lenses were used to concentrate the light from a continuous source.

Vertical light rays of the lamp are redirected into a horizontal plane, and horizontally the light is focused into one or a few directions at a time, with the light beam swept around.

As a result, in addition to seeing the side of the light beam, the light is directly visible from greater distances, and with an identifying light characteristic.