

Chatham Lights

by spencer grey

Because the seas off of Chatham always have bustled with passing ships, and because the waters are notorious for the many shoals—perhaps first noted by the Pilgrims, who altered their intended course to Virginia to turn back and settle at Plymouth—there has been a lighthouse on the bluff known as James Head since 1808, when Congress appropriated \$5,000 for the building of a lighthouse. Because Highland light already existed in Truro, twin lights were erected in Chatham to differentiate the signal from the one steady light at that location.

Unfamiliar with Cape Cod, the contractor recommended building the lighthouses of stone, but when he discovered that stones were in short supply in the area, he designed two octagonal wooden lighthouses on movable skids about 70 feet apart, as well as a three-room keeper's house. The reason for the movable skids has never been explained, but it may be that the builders believed the distance between the two lights might need to be changed.

Originally the light was illuminated by whale oil, followed by kerosene in the mid-19th century, and by electricity in 1939. Electric lighting increased the range of the beam from 300,000 to 800,000 candlepower.

In 1838 when navy Lt. Edward Carpenter assessed many of the lighthouses in the system, he found that because the keeper of the Chatham lights had not maintained them properly the towers and the dwelling were in poor condition. Consequently he recommended that they be demolished and replaced. In 1841 the lighthouse board used available funds to replace the wooden structures with brick towers that were fitted with 14-inch reflectors, and a new keeper's house was built between the towers. In 1857 the lights were replaced with the more efficient Fresnel lenses.

In 1870 the towers were 228 feet from the edge of the bluff, but a November gale that year broke through the outer beach and began serious erosion of the bluff. Captain Josiah Hardy, who was the keeper from 1872 to 1897, kept a log of the erosion in which he reported that between 1874 and 1877, 95 feet of the bluff fell to the beach below.

Because of this rapid erosion, the Lighthouse Board authorized the building of new station farther back. In 1877 two new towers were built of brick, leaving the old towers to the mercy of the rapid erosion. On July 31, 1877, the old south tower was only 64 feet from the bluff, and a year later it was only 26 feet from the edge. Residents began placing bets as to when the towers would go over the edge. By Sept. 30, 1879, the south tower was a mere 27 inches from the edge, and it toppled over the bluff on Dec. 15 of the same year. By May 1881 its mate joined it in plummeting to the beach below. The name of the winner of the bet has not been recorded.

Ten miles to the north in Eastham three lighthouses were built in 1839, but by the early 20th century only one of the three remained, and it was in poor condition. In 1923 it was decided that one lighthouse in Chatham would be sufficient, releasing the north tower to be moved to Eastham to replace the aging light there. Because it had been built of steel, it was possible to remove the rivets, move the individual pieces and reassemble them in Eastham.

During World War II Chatham light was the only one on Cape Cod that continued to shine, and the male crew was replaced by Coast Guard women, known as SPARS. In 1969 a modern aerobeacon, providing 2.8 million candlepower, was placed in a new tower that was needed to house it. The old tower with its Fresnel light was

moved to the grounds of the Chatham Historical Society, where it continues to throw its light whenever the Museum is open. In 1878 the Lighthouse Board recommended a second light for Chatham be built on Harding's Beach, "as the light would serve as a guide into old Stage Harbor, and would be of great value to vessels seeking refuge there during bad weather." It went into service in 1880 after the 48-foot cast iron tower and the keeper's house had been completed. Alfred Howard, who became keeper in 1906, is remembered for going to the aid of boaters on several occasions. In 1912 he was praised for rescuing four people when their boat ran out of fuel, and several months later in 1913 he saved the life of surfman Walter Harding when his boat capsized in a strong wind. Harding is quoted as saying, "Had it not been for the prompt assistance of A. A. Howard...it would have ended seriously...I was taken from the bottom of my boat and carried to the lighthouse where I was furnished with dry clothing and made as comfortable as possible."

Harding is equally famous for having saved the life of a horse in December 1914, as reported by Captain Ephraim Smith: On the 18th inst. I sent my man after seaweed on Harding's Beach who is quite elderly and his sight not very good. In driving the horse across the marshland, the horse got mired in mud and water.

My man couldn't do anything to save the horse, so he ran for Mr. Howard, who responded to the call readily and through some very hard work got the wagon and harness clear and then got the horse out of the quicksand and mud and water to hard land.

And as he would not take money for his very kind service, I take these means to write for your kind consideration towards commending him for his prompt and efficient aid towards saving my pet and valuable property.

Howard's pay was raised the following year from \$560 yearly to \$600.

The next keeper of Stage Harbor Light was Mills Gunderson, who came to the station from Boston Light in 1916. In 1918 Keeper Gunderson committed suicide by hanging himself in a shed for reasons unknown.

The covered walkway that connects the lighthouse to the keeper's house was a hiding place for liquor that was brought there by small boats that routinely collected it from supply boats outside of the three-mile limit. On one occasion an inspector making a surprise visit pointed out that the floorboards were loose, but much to the keeper's relief, he did not lift them but simply told him to nail them down more securely.

In 1933 when an automatic light on a skeleton tower replaced Stage Harbor Light, the government removed the lantern and capped the tower. At this point the lighthouse was bought by Peter Hoyt and his cousin Hoyt Ecker, who have preserved the historic appearance of the property by not installing modern conveniences, such as electricity or running water.

Material from the Atwood House Museum archives was used in preparing this column.



AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE
