

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE Keepers Of The Twin Lights

by **Spencer Grey**

CHATHAM — From the moment that Chatham's famous twin lights were first erected in 1808, the position of lighthouse keeper appears to have been coveted. Before construction was even completed, a number of petitions seeking the appointment were presented. But the petition in favor of Samuel Nye topped them all with 125 signers, and consequently President Jefferson appointed him the first keeper of Oct. 7, 1808.

The contractor selected to build the original lights apparently was not from the area, as he proposed constructing them from local stone, only to discover that stones are scarce on Cape Cod and all but nonexistent in Chatham. In June 1808, this contractor reported, "There are no stones to be had so the lights will have to be made of wood. Two octagonal fortyfoot wooden towers were erected, along with a small, onebedroom keeper's house. The lights were suspended on chains and burned lard.

Joseph Loveland succeeded Nye as the keeper, and he was followed by Samuel Stinson, who was forced to resign in 1832 when he was charged with dereliction of duty. In 1838 the lights were inspected by a naval officer, who reported that the 1808 towers were "...very much shaken and decayed, so as to make it dangerous to ascend them in windy weather." As a result the government appropriated funds for the lights to be replaced with brick thirty-foot tall towers with a brick keeper's house between them.

Shortly before the new lights were constructed, Collins Howes, a local fisherman who had lost a leg in an accident, became keeper at a yearly salary of \$400. The wooden keeper's house had such a poor foundation that rats had burrowed in and infested the cellar, much to the disgust of Keeper Collins, who complained bitterly about the decayed conditions. Not only was he bothered by the rats but he also reported that "The numerous leaks about my house cause so much dampness that I find it difficult to preserve my provisions from moulding." But when he lost his job in 1845, it was not because of his complaints but because James Polk, a Democrat, had succeeded the Whig president John Tyler, and Howes had always been a staunch Whig supporter.

When Simeon Nickerson, who succeeded Howes, died shortly after becoming keeper, his wife, Angeline, took over and successfully carried out her duties. But in 1849 Zachary Taylor, a Whig, became president, and Collins Howes, apparently having overcome his fear of rats and his distaste for dampness, decided that the time was ripe for him to oust the widow Nickerson. On March 20, 1849, just two weeks after Taylor's inauguration, Howes wrote to him, telling him of his previous experience as keeper and claiming that the only reason for his removal was political. He ends his request by saying "...I should like to have the appointment as Keeper of said Lights as I am disabled as to many other kinds of business for a living having lost one leg. As to my character and qualifications for a keeper of said lights I refer you to the Hon. Daniel Webster."

Upon hearing of these efforts by Howes to have himself appointed to the position in place of the widow of Simeon Nickerson, her supporters rushed to her assistance. On April 11, 1849, Joshua Nickerson also wrote to President Taylor, referring to himself as "one of your earliest friends from "Cape Cod". He explained that Simeon Nickerson left his family destitute, with their only means of support being the income Angeline received from her position as keeper.

"The appointment of his widow so far as I know gave general satisfaction. Of one thing I am certain, which is

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that she has discharged the duties devolving upon her...in a most careful and faithful manner—and no charge of neglect or want of fidelity can be sustained against her. Now I have been informed that certain individuals have obtained signatures to applications for their own appointment to this humble situation, and are asking the removal of this poor widow.”

He goes on to remind the president that he has “...ever been a Whig and since the glorious victories of Palo Alto and Lisaca, I have been an advocate of your elevation to the exalted station which you now occupy.”

As lighthouse keeper, Angeline had to check the two lights several times during the night, which involved climbing the top of each tower. Being concerned that robbers might come into her house in her absence, she carried her infant son with her as she climbed the stairs. Because of the prevalence of vagrants at that time, she always kept a boiling teakettle on her stove to ward off any intruders. She held the position for 12 years, retiring in 1861.

Possibly the most famous keeper of the twin lights was Josiah Hardy, who assumed the position in December of 1872 after a long, adventurous, and successful career as the captain of several of his cousin Alpheus Hardy's clipper ships. At the beginning of Hardy's tenure as keeper, the 1841 lights stood 228 feet from the edge of the bank. But by 1877 the sea had encroached to the point that the distance from the south tower to the cliff was only 84 feet. The situation was so dire that new towers, built of iron outside and brick inside, were rushed into production, and on September 6, 1877, the lenses from the old towers were installed in them.

One day in the 1880s while Keeper Hardy's son Samuel was playing with his friend Heman Harding, Captain Hardy strode over to them and said, “I want you boys to remember this day as long as you live because I have seen as many ships today as there are days in the year.” To pass the time when tending to the lights at night, Hardy made doll house furniture for his granddaughters out of cigar boxes, some of which can be seen in the Atwood House. Captain Hardy retired in 1897 and died in 1900.

In 1926 a flashing light was installed in the south tower, making two lights no longer necessary. The north tower was moved to Eastham, where it still stands. Since the founding of the United States Coast Guard in 1915, members of that service have tended to the light.

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