

140 Years Ago: Chatham Loses a Lighthouse

By Susan Mulgrew

It all began on November 15, 1870 when a ferocious gale created a breach in the outer beach, causing severe erosion along the shores of Chatham Harbor. Prior to the storm, Chatham's Twin Lighthouses were located 228 ft. west from the edge of the bank known as James Head. The keeper of the lights, Josiah Hardy, kept careful records of the shrinking of the bank. By December 1874, the distance from the lights to the bank's edge had decreased by 38 ft., a rate of nearly 10 ft. per year. But the rate of erosion was accelerating, with a loss of 47 ft. occurring between November 30, 1875 and November 21, 1876.

The continuing erosion of James Head threatened to destroy the lighthouses. On February 17, 1877, a representative of the Lighthouse Board arrived to inspect the crumbling bank. The Board determined that immediate action was required and decided to erect a new set of lighthouses farther inland, on the west side of Main Street. The location for the new lights was staked out in April and the lighthouse towers were completed in late August. The Fresnel lenses from the old towers were transferred to the new on September 6 and the following day the lanterns and a bit of the brickwork on the top of the old towers were removed. All that remained was for nature to take its course and finish the demolition. Chatham Monitor editor Levi Atwood remarked that if the day of the old lights' destruction could be determined "a greater crowd would assemble to witness it than has ever before been brought together in Chatham."

But the old lighthouse towers remained standing for more than two years until the south tower toppled in December 1879. As the Monitor reported, "This event, which has been expected for some months past, took place on Monday, the 15th, at 20 minutes of 1 o'clock, P. M. in the presence of only five spectators. A multitude of people arrived too late for the exhibition. The structure leaned over a little and there remained a while, as if dreading the fatal plunge, and then cracked off on the west side 2 or 3 feet from the ground, and pitchpoled over the bank and was dashed into a thousand pieces . . . The sea was very rough, though the tide was not unusually high. Most of the people were in their houses at dinner, and were (made aware) of what was taking place by the trembling of the houses which was sensibly felt."

Ironically, by the time the north tower fell on March 26, 1881, the erosion of the bank had virtually ceased. The gap in the outer beach, which had been a mile wide in 1877, had narrowed as North Beach had grown to the south and South Beach had grown northward and curved toward the shore, protecting James Head from storms. The ruins of the keeper's house and the north tower remained perched on the edge of the bank for decades, becoming a tourist attraction. A sign describing the demise of the lights was placed by the ruins during Chatham's 1912 bicentennial celebration. A number of postcards featuring the remnants of the north tower with its bicentennial signage were produced in the first decades of the 20th century. By the mid-1940s the structures were gone, although some bricks could still be found at the lighthouse overlook. A renovation of the overlook in the 1960s removed the remaining remnants of the old lighthouses.

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