

By George Worthylake

In 1620 the *Mayflower* found an island of some 60 acres on the north side of Cape Cod. It is said the plentiful bounty of fish in the area caused it to be named Billingsgate after a large fish market in London.

At one time the island supported a small community, that included a trying works and the lighthouse, but it's all gone, now that the island has disappeared.

In 1822 Congress authorized \$2,000 for the construction of the lighthouse on Billingsgate Island, MA. The original structure was a house with a lantern on the roof. The design and, probably shoddy workmanship, caused the roof to leak. The original lighting device or optic consisted of eight lamps backed with 13½ inch reflectors.

In 1838 Lt. E.W. Carpenter was appointed inspector for the newly created 2nd Lighthouse District (Boston to Newport, RI). After assuming command he made an inspection of the lighthouses under his charge. His report on Billingsgate stated;

"Fifteen miles from Barnstable, along the western shore of Cape Cod, at the entrance to Wellfleet bay and harbor, stands Billingsgate light. This is a useful light to this navigation. It is larger, however, than necessary. There are eight lamps in it, with 13½ inch reflectors, in two equal and parallel series . . . I doubt that not one of the present series would



be sufficient, but I shall recommend six lamps, suppressing two as entirely superfluous. The six to be compactly arranged to suit the navigation [ed. apparently Lt. Carpenter's recommendation wasn't acted on as an 1851 document shows eight lamps assigned to the lighthouse].

I visited this light in the afternoon, and found the keeper to be absent to a distance, without having first prepared his lamps, reflectors and glass for the night. Indeed, the reflectors had the appearance of not having been burished for some time.

Premises in sufficient order."

In 1854 the Lighthouse Service spent the same amount to "preserve" the island as was spent to originally construct the station, \$2,000, and the next year the Service recommended an appropriation of \$14,000, "For the erection of a light-house on a proper foundation, on or near Billingsgate Island, in place of the present one. It was apparent to some that the island was slowly eroding, then too the original lighthouse had always had problems with leaks. The service, for some reason, stuck with Billingsgate Island, and reconstructed the lighthouse.

The new station consisted of a 1½ story house connected to a square tower similar to those at Wood End and Long Point further out on the Cape.

By 1888 the island was eroding near the area of the lighthouse and the Service reported, "The sea is rapidly encroaching upon this island and threatens the early sumergence of the station. The beach was resurveyed and a contract was made for building and furnishing by October 31, 1888, brush and stone jetties for its protection."

In 1889 the Service reported that 560 feet of plank bulkhead and 585 feet of timber brush and stone jetties were constructed for the protection of the lighthouse. The Service noted that the sea was attempting to cut behind the bulkhead and jetties and so they extended a bulkhead perpendicular to the sea and reported, "The deposit of sand has nearly filled the spaces between many of the jetties, which seem to be accomplishing the purpose for which they were constructed." But, of course, the sea hadn't given up.

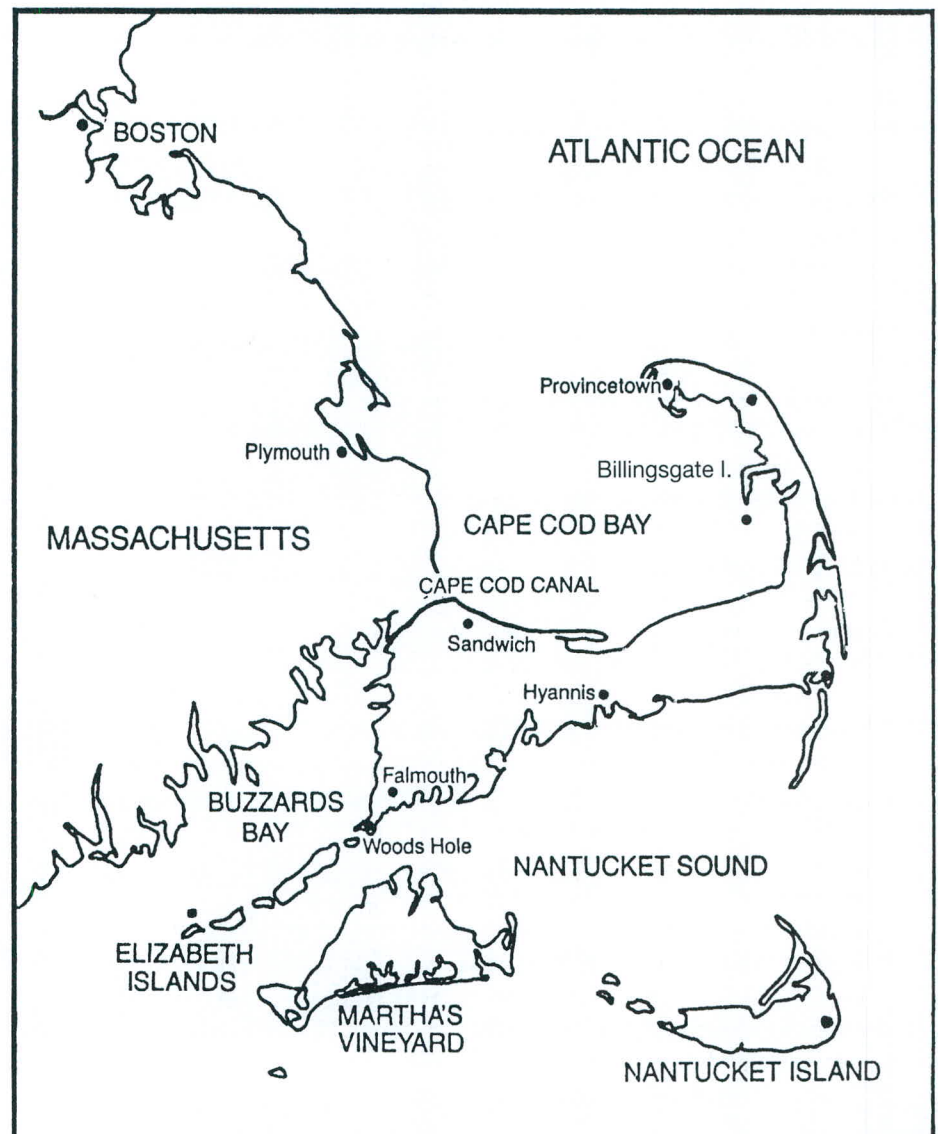
In 1891 the annual report stated the bulkheads and jetties ". . . were exceptionally efficacious, and the entire works are now buried in the sand which they have accumulated."

A new bulkhead was constructed in 1903. The next year the Service, thinking they had licked Mother Nature, made repairs to the house and constructed a brick oil house, no doubt in preparation of switching the fuel from lard oil to kerosene. In 1905 more bulkheads were constructed. By that year much of the island had disappeared and most families had left. Still confident the station could be saved, the Service constructed a boathouse as late as 1907.

By 1915 the station was being undermined by the sea and the tower began to lean. The station was abandoned and the lens removed and finally, in that

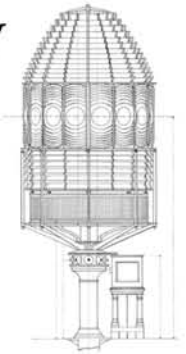
year, the lighthouse succumbed to the sea. A minor aid to navigation was established on the more stable eastern end of the island.

In 1942 the island totally disappeared. But in 1990 granite portions of the lighthouse foundation began to show at low water and act as dangerous reefs during high tide. A local boater, Chuck Cole, lost his boat, *Sunspirit*, after striking the lighthouse remains. It's rather ironic that a lighthouse, constructed to save navigation, reaches up from a watery grave and destroys a boat that it would have guided to safe harbor in days gone by . . . Only Yesterday.





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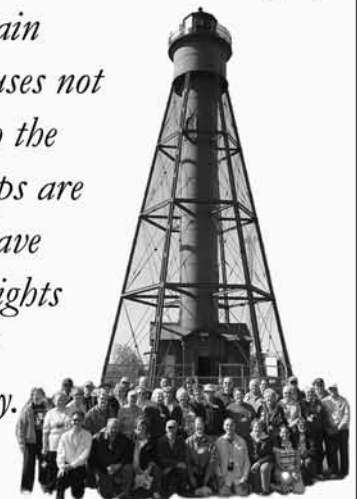
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Tincum Lighthouse, NJ