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THE KEEPER'S

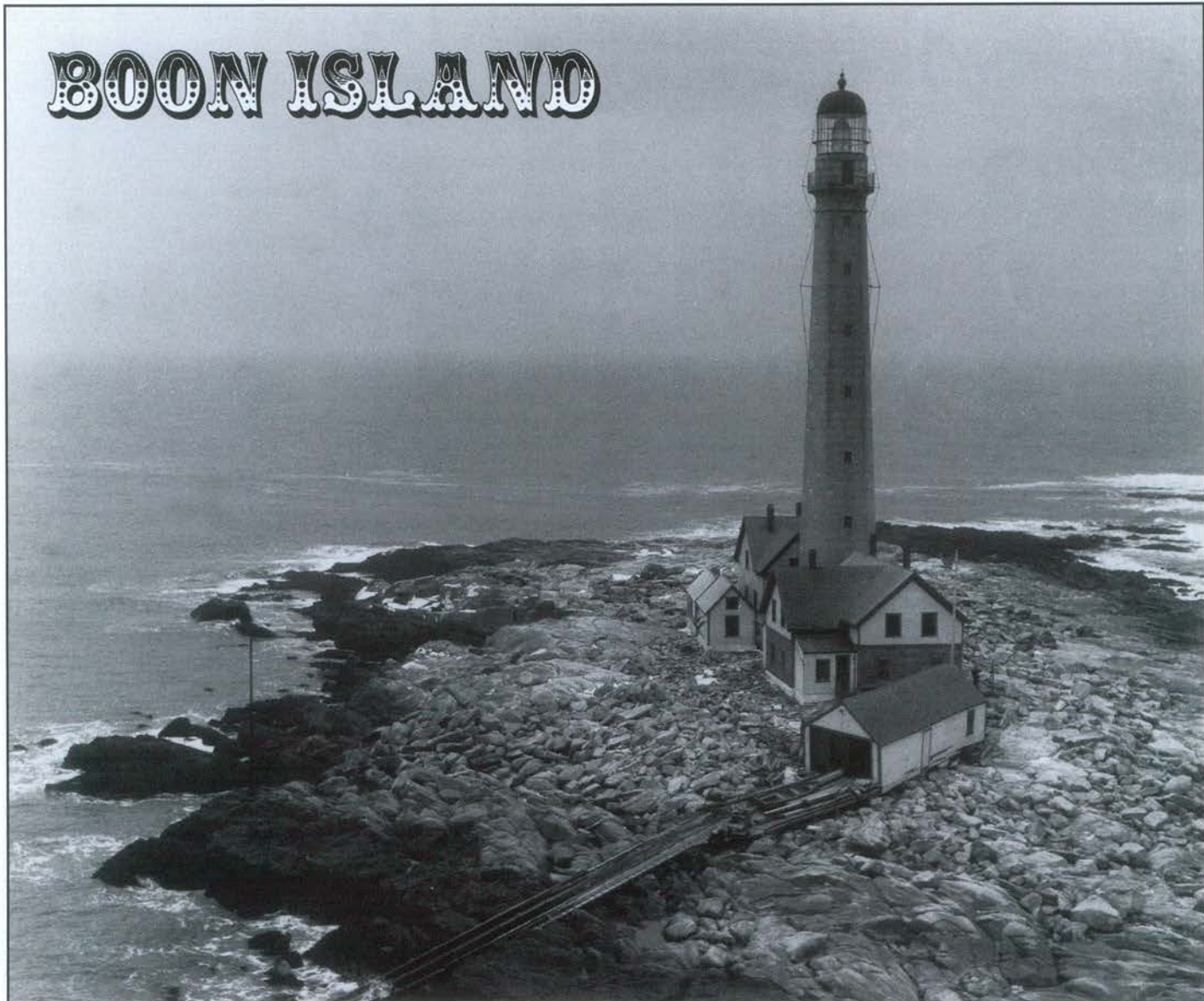
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BOON ISLAND



Boon Island Light Station, possibly in the late 1950s. Note the long marine railway in the foreground. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

By Wayne C. Wheeler

Boon Island was named by the fishermen who, for many years, left a barrel of food and clothing on the island every fall as a “boon” to any sailor who found himself shipwrecked on the lonely island. But the barrels rarely survived the first winter storm as the high point of the low rocky islet is only 14 feet above high water.

Boon Island lies 6-1/2 miles off the southern coast of Maine and about eight miles from York, the nearest port. The island measures 200 feet by 700 feet and is devoid of any vegetation. Although it is closer to shore than the other barren, low lying islands off

the Maine coast (Matinicus Rock, Mount Desert Rock), in some ways it is more dangerous to shipping. Certainly, more fishermen pass this obstruction than those farther offshore and it stands directly in the path of vessels sailing south, making for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which is precisely where the *Nottingham Galley* was headed that fateful day in December, 1710.

The *Nottingham Galley* was a swift English merchant ship that departed England on September 25, enroute Portsmouth, NH. She was hauling three tons of the best Donegal butter and three hundred wheels of Donegal cheese. A fall sailing was selected to ensure there would be cool weather to preserve the

cargo. The crossing was rough, slow and miserable. The weather was so consistently bad that Captain Dean was unable to fix their position until they encountered the English vessel *Pompey* bound for London. Communication with the *Pompey* revealed that (1) they were off the Banks of Newfoundland and that (2) the weather ahead was worse than that they had experienced during the crossing.

After riding out a nor'easter the skies cleared and allowed Captain Dean to fix the vessel's position. He determined that they were off Cape Porpoise and estimated they would reach Portsmouth the next day. He was wrong.

During a driving snowstorm on the evening of December 11, 1710, the *Nottingham Galley* plowed into Boon Island. The crew scrambled onto the island and in a short time had managed to remove pieces of canvas and some food from the doomed vessel before she went under. For over 3 1/2 weeks the men huddled among the rocks, their only shelter crude canvas tents made from the ship's sails. The weather was cold the entire time and it snowed or sleeted most days. Soon the food ran out and they were forced to eat seaweed and mussels they pulled from the rocks. Some of the crew died and the remainder eventually succumbed to cannibalism.

The survivors of the *Nottingham Galley* were rescued on January 4 by a small fishing vessel and taken to Portsmouth.

In 1799 the Boston Marine Society (Maine was then part of Massachusetts) met with

General Benjamin Lincoln, Superintendent of Lighthouses for New England, and proposed a lighthouse on Boon Island. The Society met a second time with Lincoln on February 6, 1799. After the meeting Lincoln stated, "I am of opinion that a building of an Octagonal form, sixteen feet in large diameter at the base, forty feet high... well timbered ... and then shingled with a coat of white pine shingles should be erected."

Constructing the beacon, back in the days of sail, and a wave swept rocky outcropping, wasn't an easy task. The contractor was often denied landing on the island. But by the end of summer of 1799, the fifty-foot-high unlighted beacon was completed. It lasted five years before being swept from the rock during a winter storm in 1804. The following summer a stone monument was erected on the island. Upon completion a vessel arrived off Boon Island to remove the contractor and his crew. Shortly after, the contractor and some of his men boarded the vessel – it capsized and three of the work party drowned. The rest of the crew was safely removed from the island.

In 1811, General Lincoln wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury suggesting that a manned lighthouse be erected on Boon Island. His letter stated, in part, "... There is no soil of earth on the island, the surface is composed of broken, detached stones of all sizes from several tons to pebbles and are nearer in quality to free stones than granite ... it does not appear that the sea ever makes a breach over the island."

He must have forgotten about the first beacon washing away.

The Secretary of the Treasury agreed that a lighthouse was necessary on Boon Island and bids were solicited to build a tower no taller than twenty-five feet.

In February of 1812 Congress directed, "That the Secretary of the Treasury be... authorized, on being satisfied that Boon Island, in the district of Maine, in the State of Massachusetts, is a fit and eligible site for a light-house and that one ought to be erected there on, to cause a light-house to be built on said island: Provided, That the legislature of Massachusetts shall vest the property of the said island to the United States... For the erection of a light-house on Boon Island, three thousands dollars."

Requests for bids were advertised in Boston's *Independent Chronicle*. One bid,

from John Hill, to construct a light tower, dwelling and cistern was for \$14,000. Luckily, Noah Porter and Thomas Heath submitted a bid of \$2,527 that was within the acceptable bid range through the government's procurement procedure.

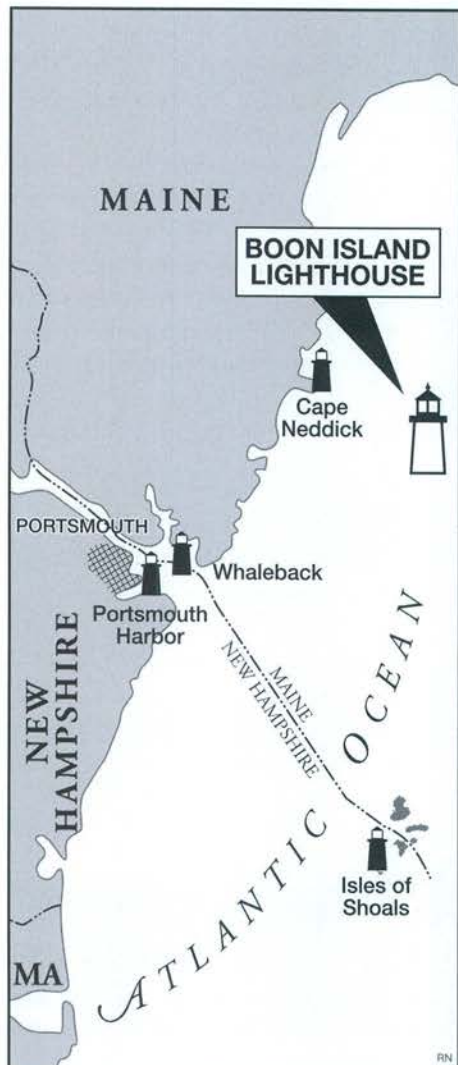
The tower was completed by winter and the first keeper was assigned. But as the storms began to get stronger, with waves sweeping up to the foot of the tower, the keeper had second thoughts about living on the barren ledge. He resigned on December 16, 1811. One of the men who had helped construct the station, David Oliver, took his place. Soon, he too became weary of the location and was replaced by Thomas Hanna who lasted until 1816, when he resigned. Eliphalet Grover then was appointed keeper. Grover was furnished a boat and boat slip, which gave him communication with the mainland.

Even during the Coast Guard years, when the station was furnished motorboats, life was not easy on Boon Island. Everything was always damp and the slightest storm brought waves high up on the barren rock. More severe storms caused waves to wash over the island. It was really a test of a keeper – to serve on Boon Island before it was rebuilt in the 1850s. The crude, stone house and tower was cold, damp and uncomfortable. Communication with the mainland was by a small sailboat.

In 1831, a severe gale swept Boon Island and some accounts state that the lighthouse was destroyed. However, the Congressional appropriations for the next year, 1832, included, "... Four thousand dollars for increasing the height of the light-house on Boon Island."

Politics played a big role in the selection of keepers throughout the 1840s; this continued until the Lighthouse Board assumed command in 1852. In September 1842, Boon Island keeper, John Thompson, was removed from his post in favor of John Kennard, a former tailor who had served at the Whaleback, New Hampshire light station.

After removal, Thompson wrote to President John Tyler, "... I have been a seaman from a boy... being now 60 years old, am poor, have a family to support, with little or no means. I voted for your Excellency for Vice President and intended to exert my feeble influence to promote another election for you for President ... why I am removed, I am at a loss to determine." Kennard retained the position but Thompson was reappointed in 1849.



In 1846, when Nathaniel Baker was keeper, the schooner *Caroline* wrecked on Boon Island and was a total loss, but the crew was saved by Baker and his assistants. In spite of his keeping a steady light and his heroic act, three years later a petition was circulated in the area demanding his removal and the appointment of Peter Stover. One of Baker's influential friends wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury, "Captain Baker is a careful, faithful, and vigilant man ... understands his duty and performs it ... the light can never be in the care of a better man." His assistant also wrote the Secretary, "Captain Baker is a man of strict integrity of character and has always to my knowledge kept a good light ... I will state also that this island is situated nine miles from land in the wake of all the eastern bound vessels engaged in coasting to the west... and it is very necessary that there should not only be a good keeper on this island but a good pilot. I believe that all parties are satisfied with Captain Baker, and would not desire a change on any account. Captain Baker is the third keeper I have been here with and I can truly say that he is far the best man that has kept the light."

However, politics being what it was in those days, Baker was removed in favor of John Thompson, who had, himself, been removed in 1843. Augustus Jenkins, the Collector of Portsmouth Harbor and in charge of lighthouses in New Hampshire and lower Maine, was so upset by this removal that he wrote the Secretary, "Having visited Boon Island several times to inspect the Light House, it is but simple justice to say of Capt. Baker, that he kept the Light House ... in good order ... In fact, no man could do more to keep a better Light than Capt. Baker, and I considered him one of the best Keepers under my superintendence."

After the Lighthouse Board took control in 1852, the Board took immediate steps to modernize our system of aids to navigation. Rules and regulations were issued. Fresnel lenses were imported from France to replace the antiquated reflector system, lantern rooms were replaced and some stations completely rebuilt. The Boon Island Light Station was one of those to be totally reconstructed. On August 21, 1852 Congress authorized \$25,000, "For rebuilding the Light-House and keeper's house on Boon Island." This represents over \$700,000 in 2001 dollars. In

August 1854, \$19,973 was authorized by Congress to construct a new lighthouse tower and supporting structures and procure a fixed 2nd order Fresnel lens. The white light from this lens had a range of 18 miles.

In 1867, a boathouse was erected on the island and the marine railway for the boat repaired.

The new Boon Island tower, still in use today, was constructed of ashlar masonry and stands 137 feet high. The tower tapers from a base diameter of 25 feet to just 12 feet at the lantern room level. The narrow design wasn't perfect. The tower swayed during storms and by 1887 two courses or tiers of masonry below the lantern began to separate from the lower portion of the tower. To rectify matters the Lighthouse Service had six, iron tie-rods and cables installed.

The 1888 Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board stated, "This tower is of ashlar masonry... the tower was strained and kept leaking by its vibration. The fourteen windows in the tower, with iron frames and sash, did not exclude water, and could not be opened for ventilation; and the floor was so low that the water flowed onto it from the entrance of the covered way, keeping the entire interior of the tower in a damp and unsightly condition. The vibration was checked by six sets of iron ties, with struts, attached to the top of the lantern and anchored to the masonry 40 feet below the watch room deck; the windows were torn out and replaced by double windows, with wooden frames and sash which readily open for ventilation; the floor

was raised 18 inches with concrete, and the tower, which was found in anchoring the iron ties in much greater need of it than was anticipated, was thoroughly repointed. The stone dwelling, which was designed for two keepers, is occupied by three, two of whom have families. It is old and its interior is in bad condition, needing thorough renovation. The island is a bare rock; communication with the coast is infrequent in winter, and the keepers have had to store their vegetables and provisions in the halls adjoining their bed-rooms. For the proper preservation of such supplies a house 12 feet by 20 feet in plan was built, sheathed, covered with paper, clapboarded, rough plastered and back plastered."

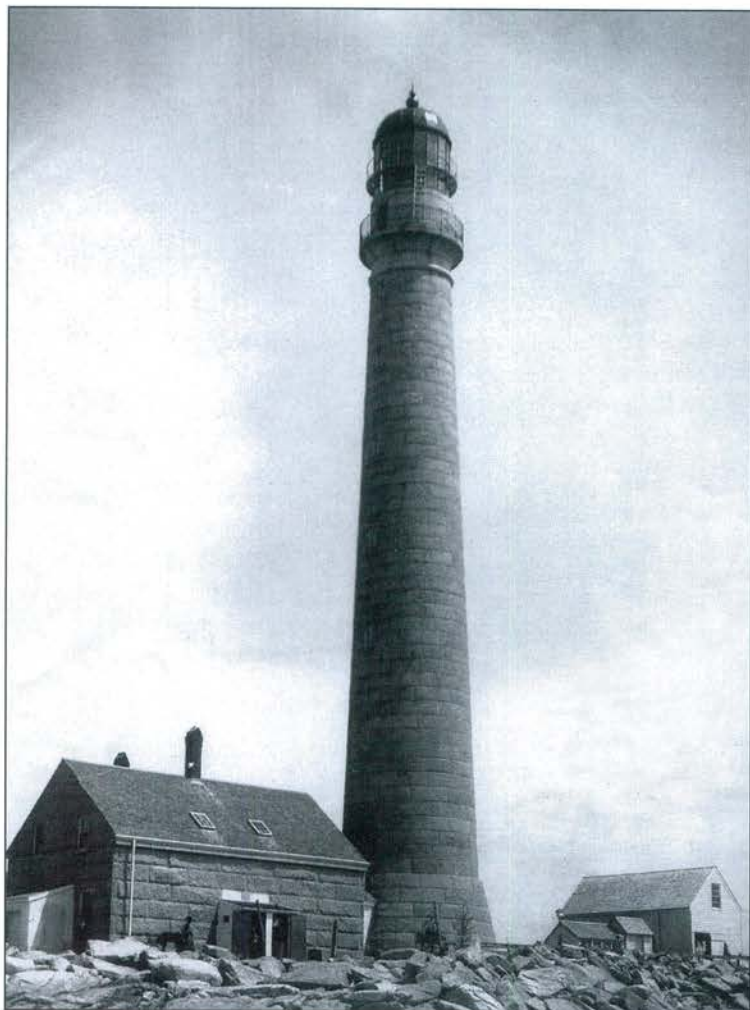
The following year the Board's Annual Report states, "While the exterior walls of the dwelling were of good coursed, quarry-faced, granite masonry, it had long leaked badly from defective linings and a defective roof, and was cold and unsuitable for occupation by families at that exposed and isolated station. Its entire exterior was therefore torn out, wholly rearranged and rebuilt, and a framed upper story was added. Materials were delivered for building a brick oil house..."

In 1890, the cracked 1,200 pound fog bell was recast and installed on top of the new oil house.

The 1891 Annual Report mentions, "Boon Island, seacoast of Maine - There are at this station one keeper and two assistants, and but two sets of quarters in one double dwelling. The second assistant keeper has to board with the family of the keeper or with that of

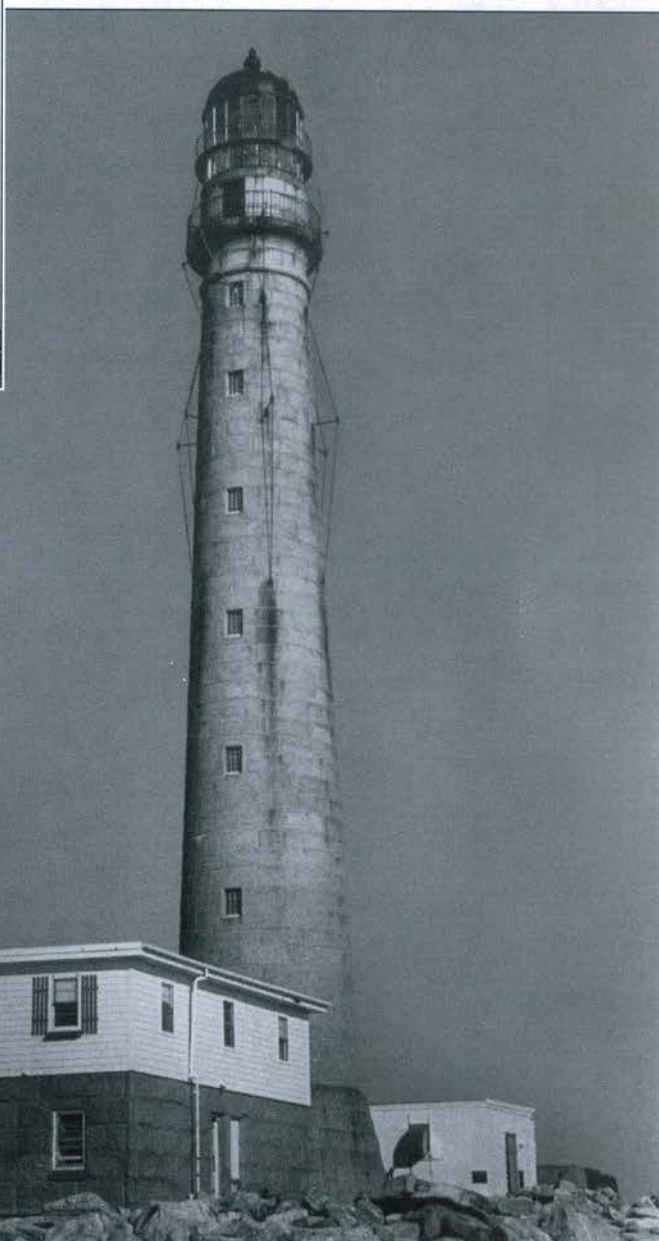


Boon Island Light Station, circa 1910 from an old post card.



Left - Boon Island, showing the dwelling before being remodeled and the installation of the stabilizing guy wires. National Archives photo courtesy of Candace Clifford.

Below – The Boon Island tower with steadying guy wires and dwelling as remodeled by the Coast Guard. Modern engine house can be seen to the right of the tower. Undated Coast Guard photo.



the first assistant keeper. This forced arrangement is unsatisfactory to all, and is quite unfavorable to the retention of a second assistant of the needed qualifications. The station is isolated and exposed, the tower is tall, and this second order light is an important one. A third dwelling... is urgently needed, it is estimated [it] can be built for \$3,400. It is therefore recommended that an appropriation of this amount be made therefore."

Apparently, this situation wasn't considered "urgent" by Congress as the Lighthouse Board repeated the request, for \$3,4000, in the next twelve Annual reports. In 1904 they changed the estimate to \$4,000 and the amount was approved on April 28, 1904. The dwelling was constructed in that year.

The keeper with the longest tenure on Boon Island was William W. Williams, who arrived on Boon Island in July 1885 as 2nd Assistant Keeper. Three years later he was promoted to head keeper. He served on Boon Island until his retirement in 1911. Years after he retired he was interviewed about his time

on the rock. He stated, "There were some days when I first went on station that I could not get away from the idea that I was locked up in a cell. All we had then was a little stone house and a rubble stone tower. When the rough weather came, seas swept the ledges clean. I was always thinking what I would do to save my life should the whole station be washed away ... I believe it is these things which gradually wear on the mind and finally upset the brain."

During his 27 years on Boon Island he witnessed his share of shipwrecks and near misses. He recalled two near disasters from early in his career, "The first wreck that I recall at Boon Island was the schooner *J.H. & G. Perkins* ran [a] shore slap bango on the northwest side. We thought sure she was going to hang there but the back wash of a sea righted her and off she went again. When she flopped on the starboard side, a gust of wind caught her sail and she stood off from the ledge as pretty as a picture and sailed away. Four years later, in July, the same trick happened with a schooner named the *Pathfinder*. She was standing into the island and when she came into stays she just didn't make it, and landed on the northwest breaker. She stuck and did not come off until the next flood tide. Just before Thanksgiving of the same year, the schooner *City of Ellsworth* went ashore on the southeast point of the island and was a total loss. She had a cargo of lumber from Bangor and was bound to Plymouth, Mass. to unload. The vessel was not insured but the cargo was. There was no fog signal then and [with] thick weather a fellow had to just guess and begorry. If he hit, he hit, and if he went by, all well and good."

Williams remarked that a most exciting rescue took place one December, when it was bitterly cold – below zero, "The schooner *Goldhunter* struck on Boon Island Ledge, about three miles from the light. The crew managed to get into their yawl boat and after a hard, six-hour row reached the light station at 1:30 in the morning. We were roused by the barking of a dog. We got out our lanterns and climbed down over the icy rocks and made out the little boat just outside the big breakers. We yelled to the castaways to follow our lanterns around to the lee side of the island, and watched them, still guided by the glimmer of our lanterns, take their chance to run in on the top of a

sea [wave]. The dog leaped ashore, with the painter line in his mouth and the three keepers grasped the boat rails and pulled the little craft up on the rocks, out of reach of the next sea. The crew was frozen to the thwarts and almost helpless. The keepers and their wives had a desperate task for the next few hours to resuscitate the almost lifeless men. One of the sufferers was a Negro boy 14 years old. Many, many years later I met this same boy and shook hands with him. The memory of that terrible night was still fresh in his mind."

In 1906, the gray stone of the Boon Island tower was painted white to make it more visible to the mariner. The station was automated in 1978. Keepers had lived on that bleak and barren rock for 167 years. The lens was removed in the mid-1990s and is now on display in a museum in Kittery, Maine.

Light Houses.

The *Argus* is mistaken in stating that it was a whig light house keeper who put out the lights at 12 PM "to save the ile." It was a democrat and appointed by Polk, to take charge of Boon Island Light, and transported for this purpose from the interior of New Hampshire, where he had never seen a vessel, and with good old fashioned country notions of "early to bed and early to rise" very verdantly supposed that vessels kept country hours, and "did not sail after it became dark."

Some of the new appointments in this vicinity are about as appropriate as the above; for instance, one of the former keepers appointed on Cape Elizabeth, has resided in the interior town of Gray until since the Presidential election, and several democrats who were well qualified and familiar with vessels and shipping, were set aside we infer, for Mr. Mayall's friend. We suppose, however, that the honorable member of Congress thought if a democratic legislature could class Gray and Cape Elizabeth together for representation, he might also class them in the division of national spoils.

From the *Portland Daily Advertiser*, May 17, 1853.



Boon Island, December 1961. Old, remodeled dwelling at left, newer dwelling in front of tower. Note bell on fog signal building and minor optic at far right. Photographer unknown.