



LOOK

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AMERICA'S FIRST LIGHTHOUSE

BOSTON LIGHT

by Wayne Wheeler

The year was 1713 and Queen Anne was on the throne of England and for the third time in nearly two months a merchant ship had been lost in the approaches to Boston Harbor. Many citizens of Boston were dismayed to learn that once again the treacherous shoals had claimed long awaited goods and merchandise desperately needed in the growing Bay Colony.

And so, the merchants of Boston laid before the General Court of the colony a petition that proposed the construction of a lighthouse at the entrance to Boston's harbor.

In typical bureaucratic fashion the petition resulted in the appointment of a committee to study the matter. The committee, after a considerable delay, recommended that a lighthouse be constructed on the southern most part of Great Brewster Island, which was then known as Beacon Island and now called Little Brewster Island. Provided this information the General Court then "resolved" that "The projection will be of a general public benefit and service and is worthy to be encouraged". A noble statement but still nothing substantial toward the reality of constructing the lighthouse.

The townspeople of Boston, in particular the merchants, would not let the matter rest. They were adamant about having a lighthouse and held a meeting to consider the matter. The Selectmen of Boston asked the General Court to give Boston preference in erecting and maintaining a lighthouse, "and being entitled to the Profits and Incomes thereof", the latter possibly influencing the town of Boston in the matter.

The General Court, however, decided to construct the lighthouse at the expense of the Province, and the following Act passed on 20 July 1715 was the result;

"AN ACT for building and maintaining a lighthouse upon the Great Brewster (called Beacon Island) at the entrance of the harbor of Boston. Whereas the want of a lighthouse at the entrance of the harbor of Boston hath been a great discouragement to navigation by the loss of lives and estates of several of his majesty's subjects (King George the First was now on the throne); for prevention thereof- Be it enacted by His Excellency the Governor, Council and Representatives in General Court Assembled, and by the authority of the same. (Sect. 1) That there be a lighthouse erected at the charge of the province, on the southernmost part of the Great Brewster, called Beacon Island, to be kept lighted from sun setting to sun rising. (Sect. 1) That from and after the building of said lighthouse, and kindling a light in it useful (1) for shipping coming into or going out of the harbor of Boston, or any other harbor within the Massachusetts Bay there shall be paid to the receiver of Impost, by the master of all ships and vessels, except coasters, the duty of one penny per tun (ed. ton) outwards, and no more, for every tun of the burthen of said vessel, before they load or unload the goods therein And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That the person who shall be appointed from Time to Time by the General Court of the Assembly to be the Keeper of the

said Light-House, shall carefully and diligently attend his Duty at all Times in kindling the lights from sun-setting to sun-rising, and placing them so as they may be most seen by Vessels coming in or going out; and upon Conviction of Neglect of his Duty before the Court of General Sessions of the Peace within the County, shall be liable to be fined according to the Degree and Circumstances of his Offense, not exceeding one hundred pounds; two thirds thereof to be to His Majesty, to and for the support of the government of this his Majesty's Province, and the other Part thereof to the Person or Persons that shall inform of such Neglect: to be recovered by Bill, Plaint or Information in any of his Majesty's Courts of Record with the Province."

This was the first Act of any legislative body in the Western Hemisphere providing for the construction of a lighthouse. And it appears that steps were promptly taken to carry out the intention of the Act, for the following year the Boston News Letter of 17 September 1716 contained the following item:

"BOSTON. By virtue of an act made in the first year of His Majesty's Reign, For Building and Maintaining a Light House Upon the Great Brewster (called Beacon) Island at the entrance of the Harbor of Boston. The said Light House has been built; and on Fryday last, the 14th Currant the Light was kindled."

The year 1716 was, really, an early date in "modern" lighthouse development. Although lighthouses, in varying forms, had been in existence since the gigantic Pharos at Alexandria, Egypt (280 B.C.) they were far and few between. In fact a lighthouse had only occupied the famous Eddystone, off southern England, for 18 years. While the Boston Lighthouse is, generally, conceded to be the first in the Western Hemisphere, it was preceded by a navigation beacon located on Allerton Point. A point at the end of a long arm of land that forms a barrier to the southern approaches to Boston Harbor.



A record of the proceedings of the General Court of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, March 9th, 1673, some 43 years prior to the tower that was erected on Great Brewster Island) includes a petition from the citizens of Nantasket, Mass (now Hull). They requested a lessening of their taxes because of the material and labor they had expended in the construction of a beacon on Point Allerton. At that session of the court it also appears that bills from Nantasket were paid for making and furnishing "fier-bales of pitch and ocum for the beacon at Allerton Point" . . . which . . . "fier-bales were burned in an iron grate or basket on the top of the beacon."

I am sure that there were other beacons, day marks or shapes as well as small structures supporting "fier-bales of pitch" in various locations throughout the colonies. However,

the title of First Lighthouse in America, and probably the Western Hemisphere, goes to that erected on (now) Little Brewster Island in the Harbor of Boston in 1716.

The lighthouse cost 2,285 pounds, 17 shillings and 8½ pence. It was constructed of stone and from prints of the era appears to have been a rather tall and graceful structure. Although the exact height is not known, I would guess it to have been about 70 feet high. The lantern-room was originally constructed of wood and glazed. Probably with thick semi-opaque panes of American glass, which was vastly inferior to the French glass of the period. There is disagreement of the type of illuminate (or lighting apparatus) originally employed.

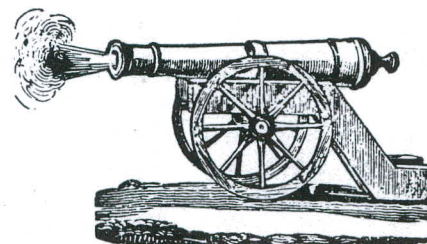
Some evidence points to a chandelier of candles, other documents speak of solid wick lamps, possibly "Spider Lamps". The spider lamp consisted of a central oil reservoir from which several hollow arms extended much like the spokes from the hub of a wheel. A solid wick was placed into each arm. The fuel used was probably sperm whale oil although other oils such as fish oil were employed. While the lighthouse was under construction the legislature anticipated the need for a keeper and to that end resolved the following on June 25th, 1716. "Resolved that the sum of Fifty Pounds (\$200) be paid out of the public Treasury for the hire of a Person to take care of the Light House for the first Year, to begin when the Lights are set up and kept up: And the committee appointed to take care of the Building of the Light House are desired to procure a suitable Person to keep it: -Consented to: Wm. Tailer (Governor)."

The first keeper, George Worthylake, was hired at a salary of 50 pounds a year, but under the stipulation that should he be derelict in his duties he could be fined up to 100 pounds. Mr. Worthylake supplemented his income by piloting vessels into Boston Harbor. Slightly more than two years after Mr.

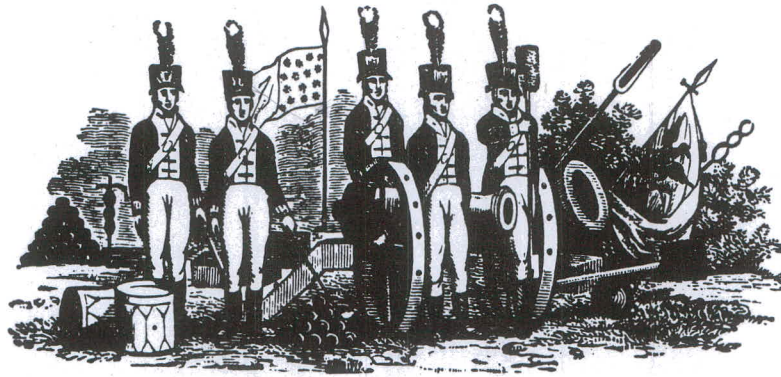


Worthylake assumed the position of keeper he, his wife, daughter and two hired hands (slaves?) were drowned when the boat in which they were returning to the lighthouse capsized. A young Ben Franklin composed a poem detailing the event which he entitled "The Lighthouse Tragedy". The poem was printed at his brothers printing shop and hawked on the streets of Boston by Ben. Copies of the poem have not survived which is probably just as well as Franklin later stated the poem consisted of "wretched verses in point style, mere blind mens ditties."

The second keeper of the Boston Lighthouse, Captain John Hayes, asked that a great cannon be provided to answer "ships in the fog". The cannon was installed and America's first fog signal was placed in operation in 1719 (that cannon bears the date 1700 on the barrel and is presently located on the grounds of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, New London, Conn.).



America's first lighthouse was also one of the most abused lighthouse structures in the history of this country. In 1720 fire damaged the tower by "the lamps dropping on ye wooden benches and snuff falling off and setting fire." The fire caused cracks in the masonry walls which were further widened by the "great" storm of 1723. The 16 foot tide which accompanied that storm is still the



highest ever recorded in Boston Harbor. Repairs were made to the tower.

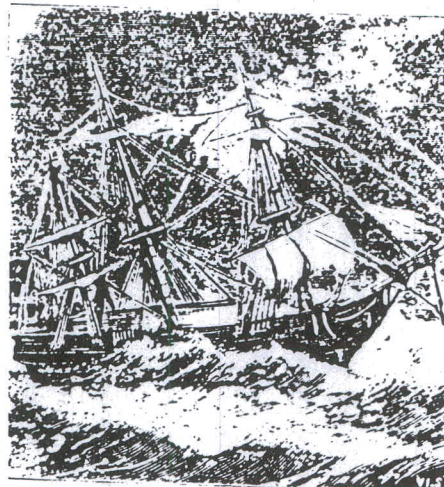
In 1751 another fire damaged the structure so badly that only the walls remained. Again the tower was repaired only to be partially burned by American troops in 1775 intent on denying it's use by British ships. The British captured the island and began restoring the structure, but on July 31st an American expedition again landed on the island, overcame the guard, destroyed the work in progress and departed with prisoners. Apparently the British again took the island and effected repairs. However, when they sailed from Boston Harbor in June of 1776 they left a trail of gun powder which effectively leveled the structure. America's first lighthouse was destroyed and the site remained dark for the next seven years.

History doesn't record if a portion of the original tower survived and is incorporated into the present tower which was constructed in 1783 of nearly the same dimensions, and of the same material, as the original tower. When finished it stood 75 feet tall with walls 7½ feet thick at the base. The cost was 1,450 pounds.

In addition to the fires and gun powder blast, the tower was struck by lightning numerous times over the years. In the 1700's authorities were thwarted in their attempts to erect a lightning rod on the structure. Godly men of those days

thought that it "vanity and irreligion for the arm of flesh to presume to avert the stroke of heaven." The tower did receive a lightning rod in the 1800's.

The "new" Boston Lighthouse sported 16 of the new hollow wick oil lamps arranged in groups of four. These were replaced with the improved system of Argand lamps and reflectors in 1811. This system was incorporated into a revolving apparatus which produced one of the first flashing characteristics in America. In 1844 the wooden stairway was replaced with one of cast iron. A cast iron balcony, iron window frames and an iron door were added. Most of these improvements remain intact today. In 1856 the tower was raised to it's present height of 98 feet and the 2ND Order Fresnel lens was installed.



The keepers of the Boston Lighthouse were to witness some rather dramatic doings over the years. Keeper Jonathan Bruce and his wife witnessed the thrilling encounter between the American ship CHESAPEAKE and the British ship SHANNON on June 1st, 1813. That was when Captain Lawrence of the American ship muttered the immortal words "Don't give up the ship" as he was being lowered below decks, mortally wounded. Apparently his crew was not of a like mind as they surrendered just 9 minutes later.

In 1844 Captain Tobias Cook established a "Spanish" cigar factory on the island. Young girls were brought out from Boston to make cigars which were shipped ashore and passed off as imported. The scam, however, was short lived as the fraud was uncovered.

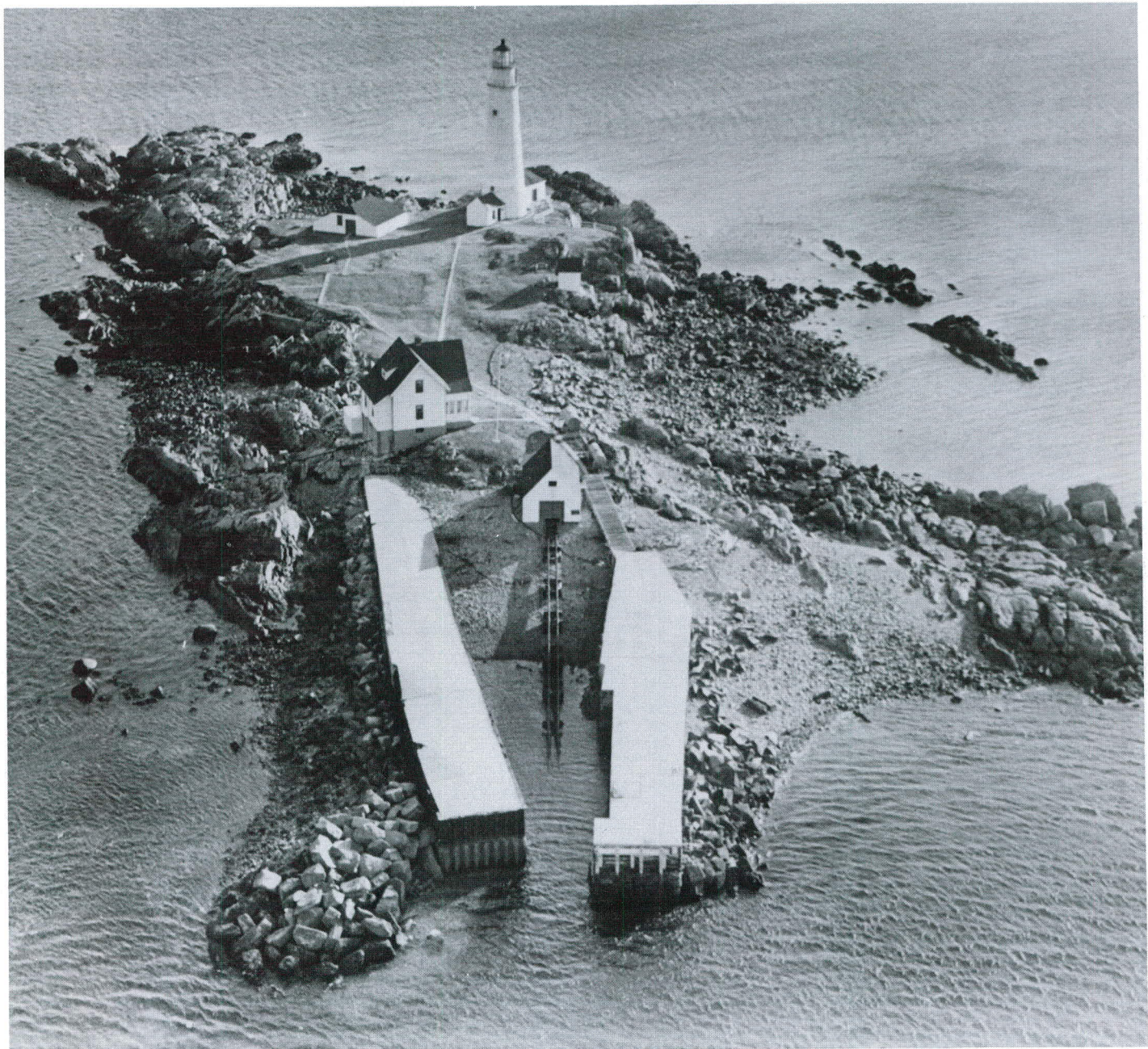
Several wrecks occurred within sight of the tower. In 1861 the square rigger MARITANA (out of Liverpool, England) went down after hitting nearby Shag Rocks in heavy seas and the driving snow storm of a southeaster. The Captain was crushed to death and only 12 of the passengers and crew made it safely ashore. Shag Rocks also claimed the vessel FANNY PIKE in 1882. The keeper, Thomas Bates, rowed to the wreck and rescued the crew. On Christmas Day 1909 the five masted schooner DAVIS PALMER, heavily laden with coal, hit Finn's Ledge and

sank with the loss of all hands. The last major wreck was that of the USS ALACRITY which wrecked on the ice covered ledges of Little Brewster Island in February of 1918. Keeper Jennings and his four assistants made four attempts to shoot a line to the doomed vessel. Each time the line parted. Frustrated with this means of rescue he finally pushed

the station dory over the ice to the vessel. It took four dangerous trips to transport all 24 men from the wreck to safety ashore. Keeper Jennings received a letter of commendation from the Secretary of Commerce for his effort.

While Little Brewster Island is the site of America's first lighthouse and the present tower, although altered

over the years, is one of our oldest lighthouses, the honor of the oldest still in existence belongs to that sturdy tower at Sandy Hook, New Jersey constructed in 1764. But that's another story.



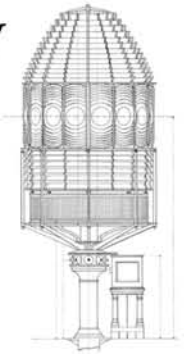
Little Brewster Island, site of America's first lighthouse and the present tower. The original light played a vital part in making Boston a major sea port during the early part of American history. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.)



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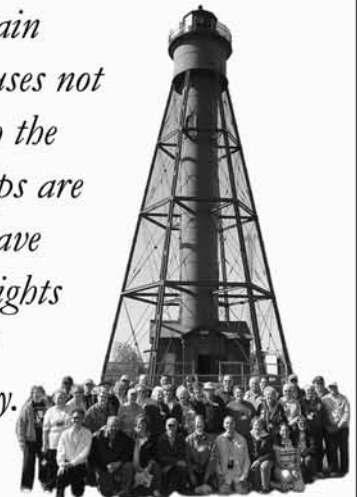
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