THE KEEPER'S LOG

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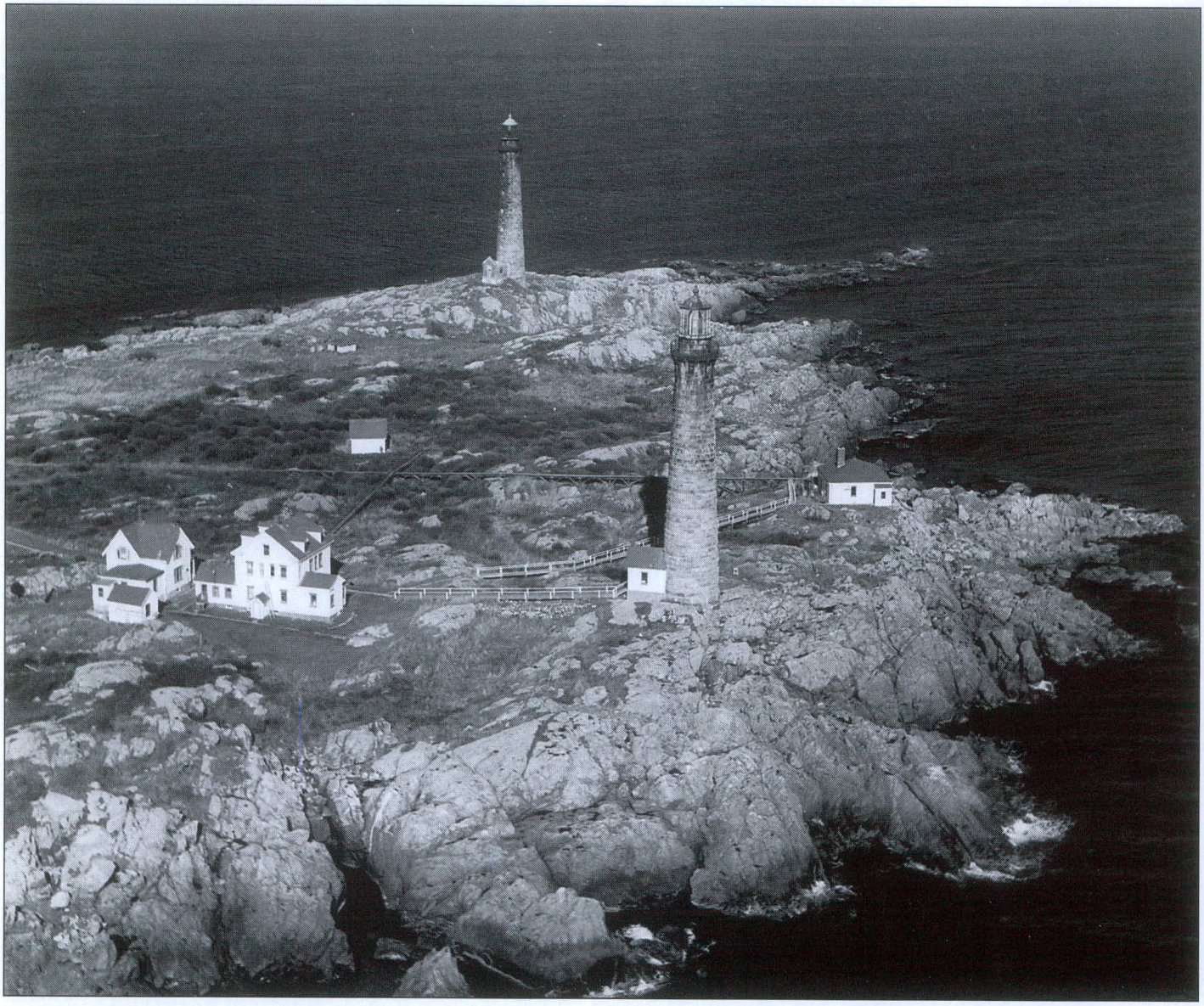
CAPE ANN LIGHT STATION

Thacher Island, Massachusetts

The Story of America's Last Operating Twin Lights

By Paul St. Germain



Cape Ann Light Station on Thacher Island, MA looking north. Date and photographer unknown, but probably a Coast Guard photo.

The Cape Ann Light Station on Thacher Island off the coast of Rockport, Massachusetts, is noted for some very significant firsts and lasts in the history of light stations in the U.S. It was the first lighthouse to mark a dangerous spot along the coast. The nine prior lighthouses simply marked harbor entrances. The original station was the 10th of the twelve stations built under British rule. The current towers are the last officially operating twin lights in the nation. The light station stands at a historically pivotal location – where this country's maritime transportation network to and from Europe, Canada and the West Indies all converged on Massachusetts Bay. The station was crucially important in the coastal trade during the early days of Americas' formation. Thacher Island was witness to many Revolutionary War sea battles including the first capture of a British war ship by a regularly commissioned Continental vessel. The light station is associated with specific events and reflects important advances in technology and engineering. It served as the official testing site for Winslow Lewis's modified Argand lamp that was later adopted for use in all U.S. lighthouses. It was also the test site for comparison of various illuminating materials including sperm, lard and mineral oils.

Two Tower Light Stations

In 1771, there were already nine lighthouses operating in the thirteen colonies, and only three north of Cape Cod — Boston, Plymouth and Portsmouth. The light station at Cape Ann was the tenth to be completed under British rule.

The Cape Ann Light Station is among the few intact twin light tower stations in existence in the United States. Several multiple lights of this type were built in the early days of lighthouse engineering so that one lighthouse could be distinguished from another. At one time there were seven twin towered light stations and one triple tower light station, all on the Atlantic coast. The other multi-towered light stations were Plymouth (1769), Bakers Island (1789), Chatham (1808), Matinicus Rock (1827), Cape Elizabeth (1828), Navesink (1828), and the three-tower station at Nauset on Cape Cod (1838). The only two twins left intact are Cape Ann and Navesink, Cape Elizabeth (modified), Three Sisters of Nauset (modified and moved), and Matinicus (lantern is missing on one tower); all other light stations have only a single tower or no long exist.

The development of modern revolving lenses, whose distinctive flash signal served to distinguish between lighthouses, ended the construction of multi-towered stations.

Up until this time, lighthouses in the United States were built to mark port entrances; the construction of the twin towers on Thacher Island marked the first such lights to mark a dangerous spot along the coast. The lights would serve to warn mariners of the dreaded Londoner, a partly submerged reef located a half-mile south-southeast of the island. The Londoner was so named because it was here that a schooner from London once foundered. Measurements from this rock determined the siting locations of the north and south towers.

The Cape Ann and Navesink light stations have a lot in common. Navesink was the first to use the Fresnel lens in 1841 as an experiment. Cape Ann was one of the last to be fitted with a Fresnel lens, although the first to use Winslow Lewis' new Argand lamp and parabolic reflector in 1814, also as an experiment. Both light stations had one tower with a fixed lens and the other a rotating lens. Today Navesink is no longer an official government light station. The beacon in the north tower was extinguished in 1894 when lighthouse officials decided to discontinue displaying lights in pairs. The south tower served until 1953 when the station was discontinued. The Cape Ann light station also honors the tradition. The Thacher Island Association installed an amber light in the north tower as a Private Aid to Navigation in 1988 as a way of honoring the station's long service. A flashing red light in the south tower continues to be operated by the Coast Guard as an official aid to navigation. So in reality Cape Ann Light Station is the last twin light in official operation in the U.S.

Early History of Thacher Island and Its Light Station

Late on July 15, 1605, sailing south from Cape Porpoise, Maine, Samuel de Champlain sighted Cape Ann. The next day he reached the peninsula and made notes of three islands, one of which would eventually be named Thacher Island. Twenty years later Capt. John Smith included it as the largest of three islands which he called the Turks' Heads.

Thacher Island was named for Anthony Thacher and his wife, the only survivors of a shipwreck on August 14, 1635, in which their four children and 17 other persons were drowned. Two weeks after the Thachers' rescue, the General Court ordered that forty marks should be paid from the Colony's treasury to Mr. Thacher "towards his late great losses." A year and half later, on March 9, 1637, the Court granted Thacher "the small island at the head of Cape Ann, upon which he was preserved from shipwreck as his proper inheritance."

Numerous shipwrecks occurred along this portion of the New England coast but a light station was not constructed on the island until 1771. Five hundred or more wrecks are said to lie on the ocean bottom around Cape Ann, which was referred to in a 19th century history of Brunswick, Maine as the most perilous shoreline on the coast. In April 1771, fourteen months after the Boston Massacre, the colonial government of Massachusetts passed a bill authorizing the construction of a twin light tower station and purchased Thacher Island on which to construct the station. The island was purchased from the heirs of Anthony Thacher. A committee of six men was authorized by the Massachusetts Bay Colony to buy the island and "erect a lighthouse or houses, and a convenient house for the keeper." This committee consisted of John Hancock (who held large shipping interests in the Cape Ann area), Capt. Nathaniel Allen, Maj. Richard Reed, Capt. Richard Derby, Joseph Erving, and Capt. John Patrick Tracy. The two 45 foot towers were first lit December 21, 1771, Forefathers' Day (a holiday then observed in honor of the Pilgrims). On the mainland, Cape Anners, nearly all mariners, peered out at the new lights and at once dubbed them with affection "Ann's Eyes."

When the towers were nearing completion, two of Massachusetts's most prominent mariners, Captain Richard Derby of Salem and Captain Nathaniel Allen of Gloucester, who were named to superintend the construction of the lighthouses, appointed a Captain Kirkwood to be keeper on December 21, 1771. During the Revolution Captain Rogers led his militiamen on an amphibious invasion to remove Keeper Kirkwood from the island, as Kirkwood was a Tory. Kirkwood later fled to Canada.

The results were reported to the British headquarters:

"This day (July 6, 1775) two or three companies went from Cape Ann to Thacher's Island, the lighthouse glasses and lamps all to pieces, brought away the oyl (sic) together with Captain Kirkwood's family and all he had on the island and put them on the main to shift for themselves."

The lights remained dark until after the Revolution. The island was abandoned in 1780 and had no keeper for five years. At this time the government tried to rent the island but found no takers. The General Court then appointed a Gloucester businessman Peter Coffin to repair and put in order the Cape Ann lighthouses and to "demand and receive" all articles that had been removed from the island. In 1784 the General Court paid both Coffin and Samuel Whittemore for putting the island houses in order. In February of that year the court ordered Coffin and Whittemore to sell to Thacher Island (and to Boston lighthouses as well) twelve cords of wood and thirty pounds of candles. These items became the means of getting the towers of Thacher back in business.

The Twin Lights were turned over to the newly formed Federal Government in 1789. During the colonial period each of the thirteen colonies had been responsible for its own aids to navigation. Soon after its formation the federal government realized that lighthouses and other aids to navigation were a national concern. As a result, on August 7, 1789, Congress passed an act, which charged the central government with the responsibility for all aids to navigation. The fledgling U.S. government subsequently took over all lighthouses then in operation. In 1790, Samuel Houston was assigned as the Cape Ann keeper by Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, through Benjamin Lincoln, Collector of the Port of Boston and lighthouse superintendent for the district.

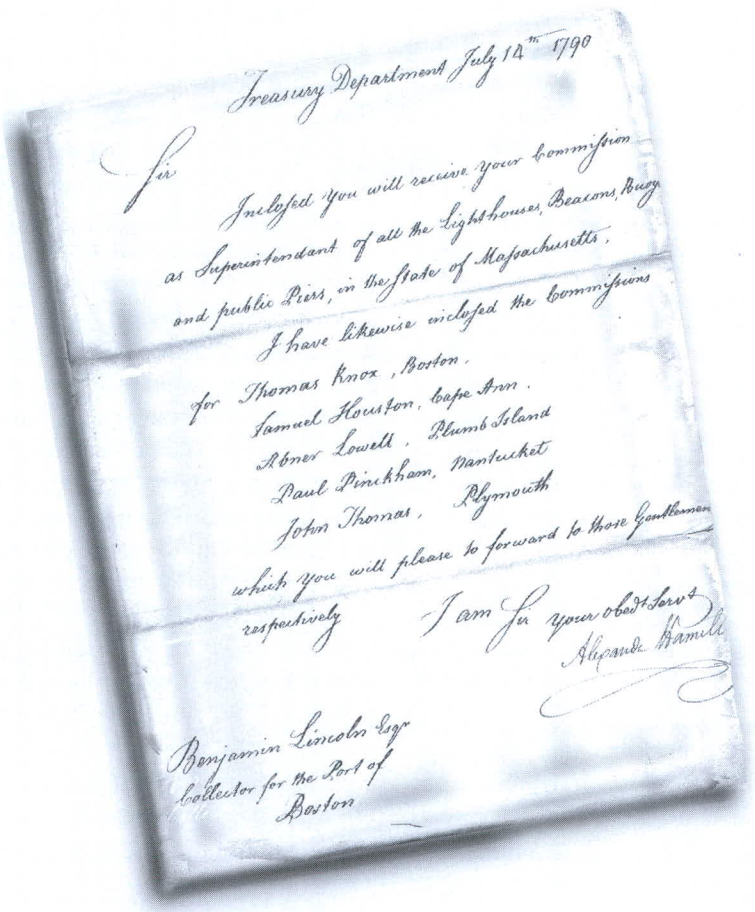
Joseph Sayward was the keeper in 1793 when the light station was finally relighted. His pay was $400 per year. President George Washington reduced this amount to "266 2/3 dollars". This was presumably because Thacher was thought to be an advantageous place to live, with livestock and vegetable gardens to provide food.

Charles Wheeler became keeper in 1836 at a yearly salary of $450. Wheeler invented, patented and put into service a new lighthouse lamp that kept oil from solidifying in the winter. Wheeler also planted apple and pear trees as well as grape vines. Many can still be seen on the island today. Wheeler was removed as keeper for political reasons in 1849. A few months later he headed for California during the Gold Rush.

Current Towers Built in 1861

Although the towers were repaired and refitted twice, once in 1828 and again in 1841, they still required attention. Lighthouse Service officials reported in 1857: "The two lighthouses at Cape Ann are only 45 feet high each built of inferior materials, badly constructed, and require attention especially during the season of winter storms, to keep them in a fit condition for the exhibition of the lights."

The survey committee went on to say: "Boston and Cape Ann lights occupy a prominent position, with many dangers to the navigator, of about two thirds of the circle around them. It is believed that the interests of commerce and navigation would be greatly ben-


Treasury Department July 14th 1790

Sir

Inclosed you will receive your commission as Superintendant of all the Lighthouses, Beacons, Buoys and public Piers, in the State of Massachusetts.

I have likewise inclosed the commissions for Thomas Knox, Boston.
Samuel Houston, Cape Ann.
Abner Lowell, Plumb Island
Paul Pinckham, Nantucket
John Thomas, Plymouth

which you will please to forward to those Gentlemen respectively

I am Sir Your obed.t Serv.t
Alexander Hamilton

Benjamin Lincoln Esqr
Collector for the Port of
Boston

Letters written by Tench Coxe, Revenue Office, Treasury Department, to Benjamin Lincoln, Superintendent of Massachusetts Lighthouses. The first two concern the keepers' pay and the last one admonishes the superintendent for allowing overuse of candles and coal in his district.

July 19, 1793

". . . these considerations . . . have likewise led to the reduction of the Boston keeper and of the Thatcher [sic] Island keeper to 266 2/3 dollars. The first has very convenient opportunity to pursue a profitable calling and has fish in plenty and some advantages from the land – the second has the same benefit from the same sources . . ."

December 2, 1795

". . . The keeper on Thatcher's [sic] Island has thirty acres of land which, though broken, is capable of growing summer and winter feed for a cow and a pair of oxen and for ten sheep; although this is not much ground, but farmers and gardener's vegetables may be raised upon it, and no doubt fruit. His compensation appears therefore unnecessary."

March 1, 1797

"Sir:

"On a review of your account it appears that large quantities of candles have been charged for use at Thacher Island and Plymouth lighthouses.

"In the present quantity for the former 80 are charged and 50 for the latter. No charges of this nature appear in any of the Superintendent's quarterly accounts to the southward of New York, because it is supposed that they use a little lamp to light the lantern, and for those to the northward of Cape Henlopen (except in Massachusetts) 4 or 5 per quarter is the utmost quantity charged.

"The quantities of coal charged for the same lighthouses and Portland are also very great, when compared to other places. It is necessary that these matters be conducted with care and economy by the keepers – the application of public stores to their family use is always to be guarded against. This is a delicate remark in reference to men whose integrity I do not wish to question."

efited by having two lights of the First Order in place of the present ones: and that it would be a wise economy to substitute the lens apparatus whenever Congress may think proper to make the necessary appropriation for rebuilding them, the estimation of cost for which is $68,751."

Following this 1858 recommendation, temporary repairs were made at the Boston Light Station and the lighthouse towers at Cape Ann. Because there was an urgent need to replace the now nearly-100-year-old lighthouses, Congress quickly took action.

In 1859, Congress appropriated $81,417.60 for "rebuilding the two lighthouses on Thacher's Island, Cape Ann, and for fitting them with first order illuminating apparatus." It took 2 years to complete the towers of "cut granite" which were lighted for the first time on October 1, 1861 soon after Abraham Lincoln took office. Alexander Bray was the keeper in 1864.

On December 21, his assistant became very ill with a fever. Bray and another assistant left for the mainland to take the ailing man to a doctor. They left Maria Bray, the keeper's wife, in charge of the station. The only person with her was her fourteen-year-old nephew, Sidney Haskell. A heavy snowstorm swept the area later that day, making it impossible for Alexander Bray to return to the island. Maria Bray and Sidney Haskell braved the high winds and heavy snow to light the lamps in both towers. Each tower had 148 steps, and Maria had to repeat the trip three times that night to keep the lamps supplied with oil and the lantern room panes free of soot. A second night passed before Alexander Bray could return to the island, and not once did Maria Bray allow either light to go out. It was a happy Christmas as the Brays were reunited.

Weather has always been a prominent factor in life on Thacher Island. On October 20, 1891, an assistant keeper named John Farley lost his life as he attempted to land at the boat slip in heavy seas. One of the most famous storms in New England coastal history called the Portland Gale struck on November 26-27, 1898. It was named for the loss at sea of the Maine-bound steamer *Portland* with all hands and passengers – some 176 in all. Captain Reuben Cameron of the fishing schooner Grayling last sighted the 281-foot, side-wheel steamship, Portland, about midnight some 12 miles northeast of Thacher Island, as the ships raced for shelter in Gloucester Harbor. An assistant keeper at Thacher Island, Albert Whitten, may have been the last person to see the side-wheeler as it was foundering far out in Massachusetts Bay. Over 150 ships were lost into this storm during a 36-hour period.

Above – Cape Ann Light Station's north tower with assistant keeper's dwelling at left. Note the long covered walkway to protect the keepers during inclement weather.

Below – Cape Ann Light Station's south tower and duplex dwelling. Both photos probably 1880s courtesy of the Thacher Island Association.

Boston was the preeminent U.S. port for many years and during some periods rivaled all but the trade of London. New Englanders exchanged fish, timber products, and other provisions, for molasses and rum produced in the West Indies. The story of the early growth of the port of Boston is best told in Samuel Eliot Morison's The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860. In 1702 the only English Colonial ports worldwide possessing more shipping tonnage than Boston were London and Bristol! By 1760 probably one out of four vessels in the greatly expanded English merchant fleet was American-built. From 1690 to 1740 the population of Boston grew from seven thousand to seventeen thousand. In November 1794 an observer reported that Boston possessed eighty wharves and quays, and that not less than 450 sail of ships (vessels square-rigged on all three masts), barks, brigs, schooners, sloops, and small craft were in port. In 1807 Massachusetts 'registered tonnage engaged in foreign commerce was over twice that of her nearest rival, New York, and was 37 percent of the national total. Her fishing fleet, which was largely dependent upon foreign trade, was nearly 90 percent of the total. Southern Europe was an important supplier of salt used in the New England fisheries industry. The revival of trade after 1814 (because of the British blockade and new embargoes) was gradual but steady. Boston continued to own the greatest tonnage per capita of any American port and only New York had an absolute tonnage advantage. The selection of Boston in 1840 as the western terminus for Cunard's pioneer transatlantic steamship service from Liverpool was considered a great coup by Bostonians and rivals alike.

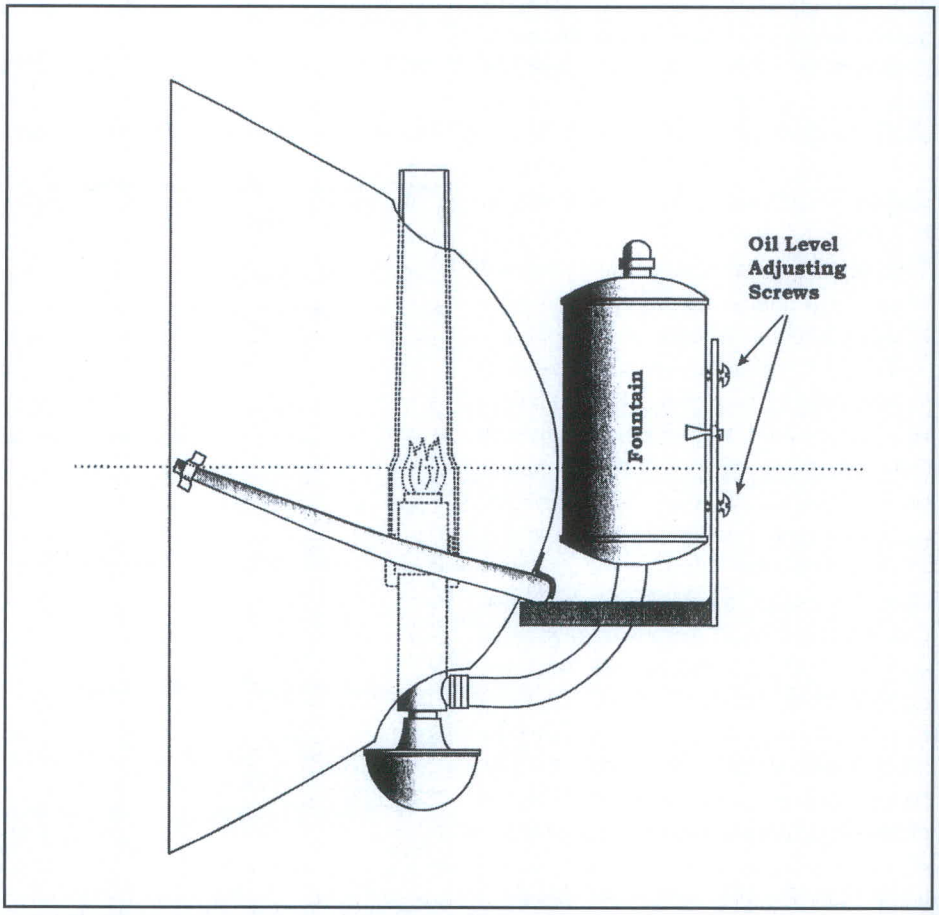
To the north, Salem was an early leader in the trade to East Africa, India, and the Spice Islands. Salem vessels frequently called at many intermediate eastern ports, trading entire cargoes many times. The most formidable rival to Boston in the contest for oriental wealth lay but sixteen miles north and only five miles south of Cape Ann's lights. Salem with little fewer than 8,000 inhabitants was the sixth largest city in shipping tonnage in the United States in 1790. Shipping amounted to over 25,000 tons in 1798, by 1807 it was over 41,000 tons. This compared to Boston's 80,000 in 1798 to 120,000 in 1807.

By the end of the 18th century, New England merchants also controlled the exotic China and Far Eastern trade. The volume of sea traffic around Boston and the treacherous nature of the waters is the reason why the colony's first two formally authorized lighthouses were Boston Light in 1716 in Boston Harbor and Brant Point Light in Nantucket in 1746. These were soon followed by Plymouth Light in 1768 and Cape Ann Twin Lights in 1771.

In the early history of America no business was of greater importance than coastal shipping. Great fleets of coasters, many of them square-rigged, rounded Race Point from the westward and the South. It has been enumerated that eighty sailing packet lines established between Boston and New York, Albany-Troy, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans from the 1820s to the 1850s. The coastwise arrivals at Boston in 1825 reportedly included 23 ships, 215 brigs, 977 sloops, and 1,292 schooners. These coasters arrived from both near and far, from Maine, Cape Ann, the North and South Shore, Cape Cod, New York, Philadelphia, the near South, and the Deep South.

Early Optics in the Cape Ann Light Station

The earliest illuminant employed in the Cape Ann towers was a modified Argand lamp. In 1810, Captain Winslow Lewis, an unemployed ship captain, persuaded the federal government to adopt his Argand lamp to which he added a parabolic reflector system as a means of lighting this country's lighthouses. A demonstration was held at the Boston Light Station tower before government representatives. He showed that the lamp and reflector system was greatly superior to the old spider lamp system. In addition to giving a brighter light it used half as much oil. The Lewis light impressed Henry Dearborn, the collector of customs in Boston. After witnessing an official full-scale testing in one of the Cape Ann towers, he urged the Secretary of the Treasury to take up Lewis's offer to sell his patent to the government. In addition to his patent offer, Lewis proposed refitting all the country's lighthouses – then 49 in number – with his new system for the sum of $26,950. In 1812, Congress appropriated $60,000 to pay

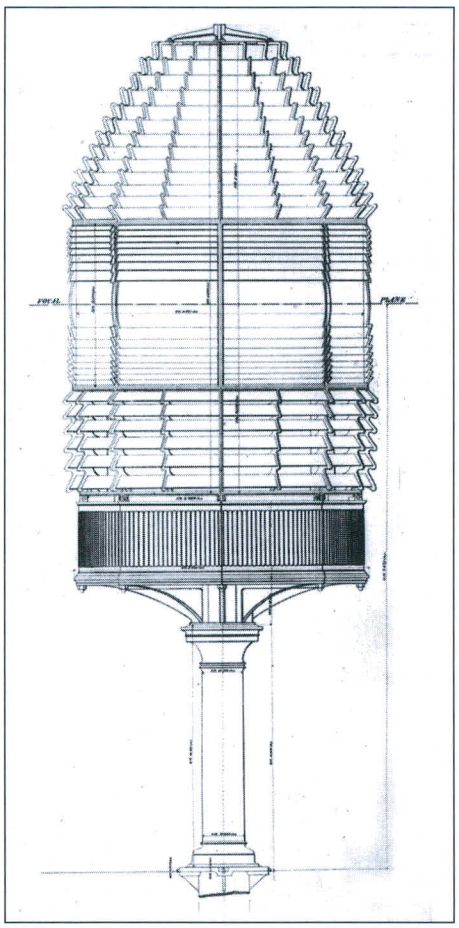


Winslow Lewis & Benjamin Hemmenway's Lighthouse lamp and reflector showing mounting in chandelier. Drawing courtesy of Tom Tag.

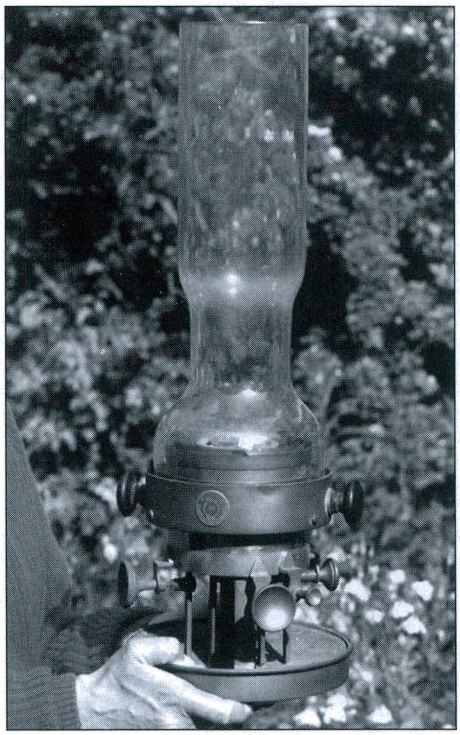
Lewis for the patent as well as for outfitting the nation's lighthouses with his apparatus and maintaining them for seven years. He also managed to convince the government that it would be cost effective to purchase a schooner, the *Federal Jack*, and fit it with a blacksmith shop, a carpenter shop, and bunking spaces for thirteen men along with the necessary equipment to carry out the work. Before the War of 1812 he had outfitted all but nine of the nation's lighthouses. He finished the last stations in the fall of 1815. In 1816, Lewis entered into a contract with the government to supply the lighthouses with oil and to annually visit each lighthouse in person to maintain the lights and report on the condition of the lighthouses to the Treasury Department. A student of this period of lighthouse history has noted: "the contract made Winslow Lewis the de facto superintendent of lighthouses." Winslow Lewis published the first light list called *A Description of the Lighthouses on the Coast of the United States* in 1817. In it he included all 55 lighthouses on the coast. He described Thacher Island Lights as follows "Situated on Thacher Island, 2 miles from the mainland of Cape Ann there are two lights, one third of a mile apart, bearing S. by W. and N. by E. from each other. The Lanterns are elevated about 90 feet above the level of the sea, and contain fixed lights, which may be seen 7 or 8 leagues distance. Boston Light bears from these lights S. W. distance 9 and one half leagues." He describes in this short 10-page booklet that "All United States Light-Houses, are now lighted with *PatentLAamps and Reflectors*"

Because Stephen Pleasonton, the Fifth Auditor and head of the lighthouse establishment, relied so heavily on Lewis for all lighthouse construction matters he eventually became the principal builder of lighthouses in the United States. Lewis won so many contracts that he drew up a set of plans for the five different sizes of towers that he believed would meet the needs of any land location.

Winslow Lewis is considered somewhat of a charlatan by many lighthouse historians. First, his lamp and reflector system was copied by the Swiss scientist Amee Argand and although the reflector was suppose to be parabolic, one early critic stated that is was about as parabolic as a baby's wash basin. The optic system was very shoddy and his "improvement" of placing a thick green lens in front



Fixed 1st order Fresnel lens of the type installed in both of the Cape Ann Light Station towers in 1861. Lighthouse Society drawing.



A five-wick lamp used in one of the Cape Ann Light Station towers and still on the island. Photo courtesy of the Thacher Island Association.

of the optic actually reduced the power of the optic. He used inferior materials in constructing towers and many fell down. Finally, he managed to convince Stephen Pleasonton, the titular head of our aids to navigation system, that the Fresnel lens (invented in 1822) was too expensive. In fact, the Fresnel lens was more economical than Lewis's system as it used only one lamp, where the reflector system used as many as 21 lamps. But, then, Lewis always won the contract to furnish oil to the lighthouses.

Eventually, the superior Fresnel lens eventually replaced the Lewis lamps in the 1860s after the Lighthouse Board was installed.

Two first-order Fresnel lenses were installed in the twin towers at the Cape Ann Light Station in 1861. The use of Fresnel lenses was first tested at another twin tower station, Navesink, in 1841. A first-order fixed light and a second-order revolving light were ordered from France by Commodore Matthew Perry in 1838 and installed in Navesink's twin towers in 1841. A Fresnel lens was also tested in the Sankaty Head tower on Nantucket Island. When Navesink was rebuilt in 1862, both towers used first-order Fresnel lenses. It is interesting to note that the last two remaining twin light stations in existence in America today were both used to test new lighting technology.

A variety of fuels were used over the years in the optics on Thacher Island. It has been reported that in 1861 whale oil was used. In the 1864 files of the Lighthouse Board a keeper's report mentioned the use of lard oil. In the Annual Report of the Lighthouse Board for 1875 there is an account of the investigations of the Board relative to illuminating materials by the chairman of the committee on experiments. In this report the Cape Ann Light Station was mentioned as follows, "...after these preliminary experiments (previous trial with small lamps, with solid wicks, instead of the Fresnel lamp, with hollow burners), two lighthouses of the first order, separated only by a distance of 900 feet, at Cape Ann, Massachusetts, were selected as affording excellent facilities for trying, in actual burning, the correctness of the conclusions which had previously been arrived at. One of these lighthouses was supplied with sperm and the other with lard oil, each lamp being so trimmed as to exhibit its greatest capacity. It was found by photometrical trial that the lamp supplied with lard oil exceeded in intensity that of the

one furnished with sperm. The experiment was continued for several months, and the relative volume of the two materials carefully observed. The quantity of sperm burned during the continuance of the experiment was to that of lard as 100 is to 104."

Again on August 6, 1884 mineral oil was introduced as the fuel source. Mineral oil, as it was called at the time, is kerosene. There is a report dated January 8, 1876 by the keeper on the use of English wicks at the light station. For several years, prior to the 1930s and up to 1932, incandescent oil-vapor lamps (I.O.V.s) were used, each of 22,000 candlepower. Finally in 1932 the towers were electrified with the lamps producing 75,000 candlepower. Only the south tower used a single flashing white light, while the North tower was only used for emergencies. It is obvious from these various reports that Cape Ann Light Station was used as a testing location for many of the suggested improvements to lighthouse technology.

Despite the lights on Thacher Island, many wrecks still occurred in the vicinity. In 1876, a freighter carrying 800 tons of coal struck a submerged wreck in a storm. The citizens of Cape Ann saved on their fuel bills that year, as they salvaged 500 tons of coal from the ship.

In the late 19th century a narrow gauge railway (tram system) was installed on the island. Over the years it was gradually extended until by 1900 it consisted of over 500 feet of track. This railway was used to bring fuel and supplies to the various buildings (dwellings, towers and fog signal building. A telephone line was installed in 1902, connecting Thacher Island to the mainland at Rockport.

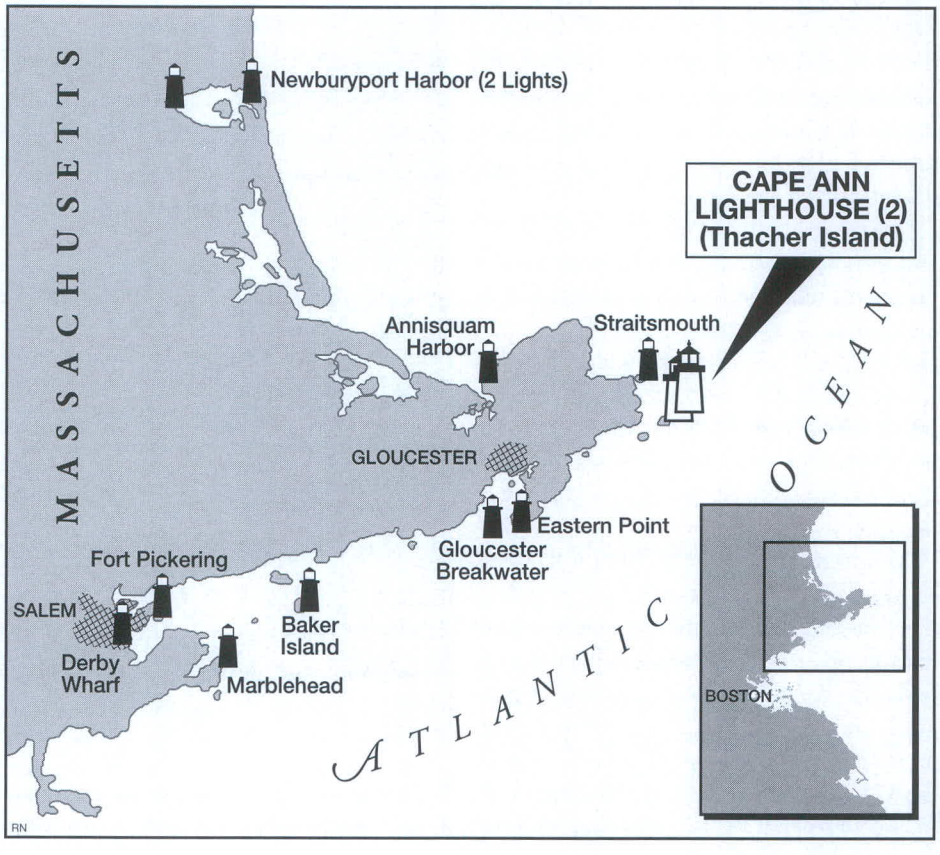
At one time there were five families living on the island. There were two, duplex assistant keepers' dwellings along with the single family, principal keepers house. Several children were born at Thacher Island over the years. There were seven children living at Thacher in the early 1900s. The state refused to build a school on the island, but they finally agreed to pay a teacher to live on the island. The teacher, a young woman, didn't stay at the island very long. She met and subsequently married Edwin Tarr, son of the keeper and an assistant keeper himself. The couple moved to Boston where Edwin served as keeper of the Long Island Head Lighthouse. Family members thereafter did the schooling at Thacher. Eventually the children were rowed ashore each day to Loblolly Cove where they walked to school in Rockport.

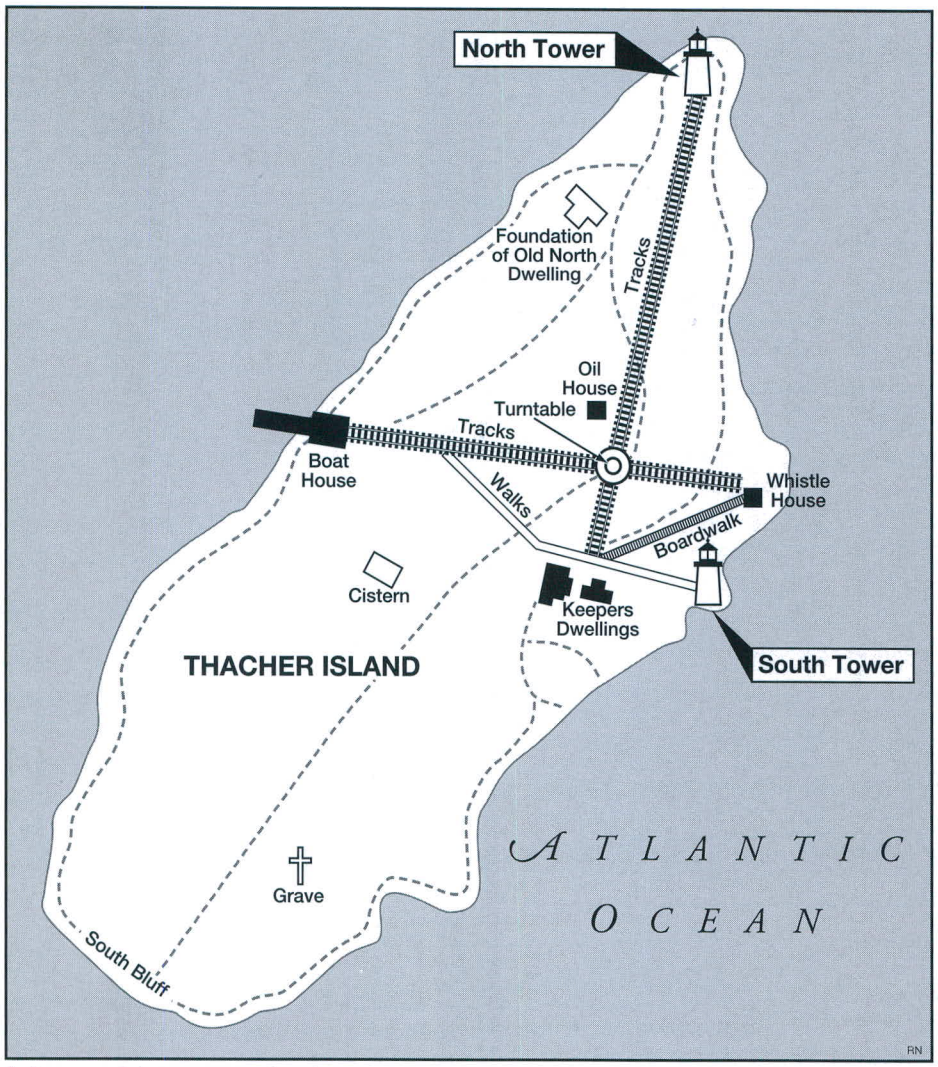
The invention of the telegraph system improved long distance communication. In 1874, the light station on Thacher Island also served as a storm signal station by connecting the island to the Rockport telegraph office through a submarine cable. The system allowed the island to run up beacons to warn ships of approaching storms. In the tempest of 1878, not one wreck occurred within 40 miles of the Thacher Island station. In March of 1885, the Chief Signal Officer discontinued the signal station and turned all apparatus over to the Lighthouse Board. In 1884 the town became the American landfall for the trans-Atlantic cable passing right by Thacher's Island within a few yards of its southern end.

A huge civil works project planned for this area gives an indication of the critical role in marine safety played by the Thacher Island station. In the 1880s, a huge L-shaped breakwater 1-1/2 miles long and a Harbor of Refuge were planned just outside Rockport Harbor and adjacent to Thacher Island. According to a report at the time, "the construction of this breakwater as planned would render Sandy Bay one of the most magnificent harbors in the world." It would be large enough to hold 5500 ships. A count of vessels then revealed that an astonishing 70,000 ships sailed by Thacher annually (nearly 200 per day). The same survey showed that in the eight preceding year's as many as 98 ships had been total losses and that 378 more were partial losses. Altogether, with their cargoes, the losses amounted to many millions of dollars. The breakwater was to provide a harbor of refuge, but it was never completed and became a hazard. This resulted in the Thacher Island station being even more critical to the safety of navigation.

The Thacher Island twin light towers were adopted in 1888 as the principal design for the official seal of the Town of Rockport, which had been incorporated in 1840. Both towers have been local landmarks ever since.

The Cape Ann Light Station may once have saved the life of a President. Steaming home from Europe in 1919, the passenger liner *America* had on board a special guest, President Woodrow Wilson, returning from the Versailles Peace Conference, which officially ended World War I. Blinded by a heavy fog off the coast of Massachusetts, the *America's* crew unknowingly had the big ship on a collision course with the rocky Thacher Island. The fog was so thick that no one saw the lights of the island's twin towers. A sailor on lookout duty heard the blast of the island's





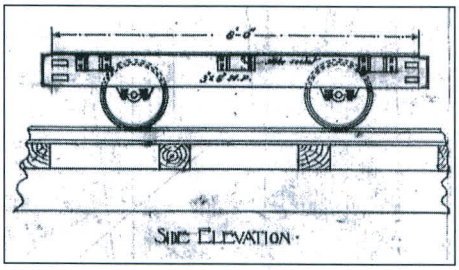
foghorn, and the captain ordered an emergency change of course – just in time to avert a disaster of truly historic proportions.

Thacher Island's Role in National and Local Commerce

Rockport was called Sandy Bay until 1840 when it was incorporated as the Town of Rockport. From early Colonial times, much of Rockport's history and economy has been tied to the sea. Rockport is famous for its granite quarries that started in 1800. By 1815, twelve to fifteen sailing vessels were used for the transportation of stone to ports along the Atlantic Coast and as far south as the West Indies. These quarries provided blocks for buildings (including the Customs House in Boston), wharves, and bridges all along the East Coast, as well as countless cobblestones and curbs for city streets worldwide. Ironically, the granite used on Thacher Island's twin towers came from New Hampshire and not Rockport because the local granite was supposedly too soft, and contained too much iron according to the engineers.

By 1820, the quarries provided jobs for over 500 residents. This industry even surpassed fishing as the largest business in Rockport by the year 1900. As late as 1903 Rockport granite was used to build the 113-foot Graves Lighthouse in Boston Harbor.

The Cape Ann Light Station is critical to the commercial fishing industry of Gloucester and the surrounding area. Early New England fisherman worked from small boats in coves or close to shore. Later, they sailed to the rich, in-shore fishing grounds off the Gulf of Maine and George's Bank, and by 1700, as far as the Sable Island Banks and the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. They caught mackerel, herring, cod, haddock, halibut, and pollock. By about 1775, nearly 5,000 fishermen were sailing more than 500 vessels in the area. According to Morison, "fisheries were the specialty of Gallops, Folly, Pigeon, Long, and Loblolly coves on Sandy Bay and the north side of Cape Ann. These villages were all in the township of Gloucester, until 1840, when some of them were combined to form the Town of Rockport." The typical Cape Ann fishing vessel, of the Federalist period, was a Chebacco boat (ancestor of the Down East 'Pinkies' of today) – so called from the Chebacco Parish of Ipswich where this type was invented and built. In 1792, Cape Ann's harbors and coves moored one hundred and thirty three Chebacco boats averaging eleven tons. By 1804, the number had increased to two hundred and the tonnage doubled. This fleet has continued to be an important industry



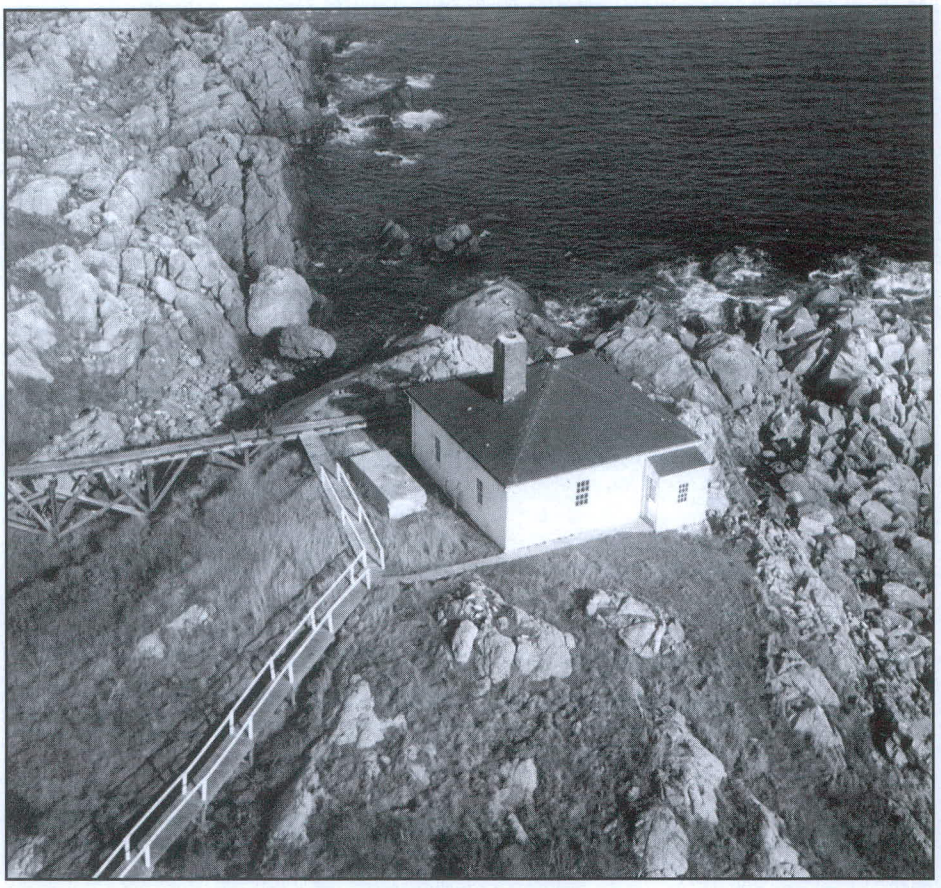
Railcar used on Thacher Island to move supplies. Lighthouse Service drawing.

until the present day with a new generation of vessel, including large stern trawlers, draggers, numerous smaller vessels, and lobster boats. Records of cod and mackerel fisheries of Massachusetts 1837 to 1865 indicate that Cape Ann vessels increased in number from 221 to 378, employing from 1,580 to 4,939 men. By providing a guiding light to the thousands of local fisherman, the twin towers of Cape Ann have been instrumental in enabling Gloucester to retain the title of "America's First Seaport" and to this day make fishing the key industry.

Role in Maritime Transportation

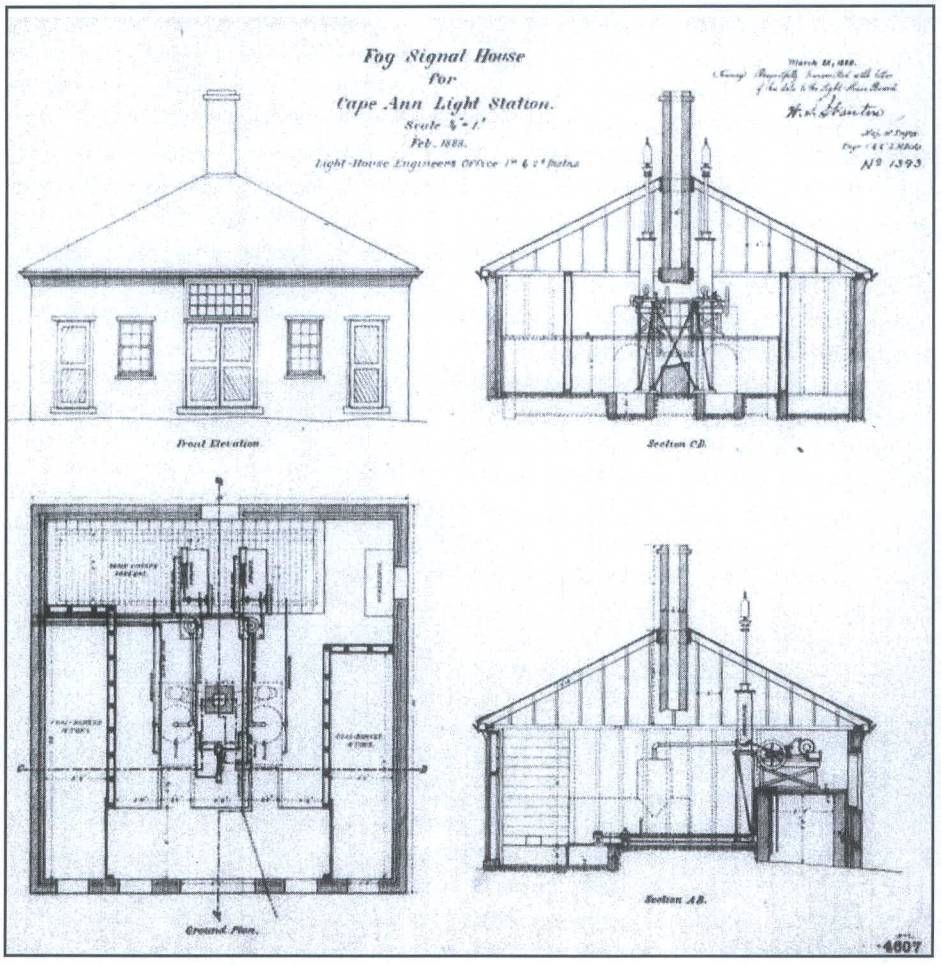
Early in its history, Massachusetts served as the first landfall for the northern sailing track from Europe and Cape Ann Light Station's twin lights were the first seen by ships coming into Massachusetts Bay. According to the Light List of 1854, Cape Ann Light is listed as "Two stone towers. Cape Ann forms the northernmost limit of Massachusetts Bay. These lights are 30 miles from Boon Island light, 24 miles from Boston light, and 43 miles from Cape Cod (Highlands Truro) light." The twin lights at Thacher, early in American history, were considered to be among the most important, ranking with

the Cape Hatteras Light in North Carolina, Eddystone Light in England and Boston Light in Massachusetts. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, fisherman and ship owners constructed crude wooden towers that burned pitch as signal lights to mark particularly dangerous spots. The Cape Ann Light Station was critical for the coastal trade, and trade with the West Indies, China, The Far East, and Europe. Nearly half the vessels, which arrived or departed Boston, worked the coastal trade to the middle and southern colonies and the West Indies.

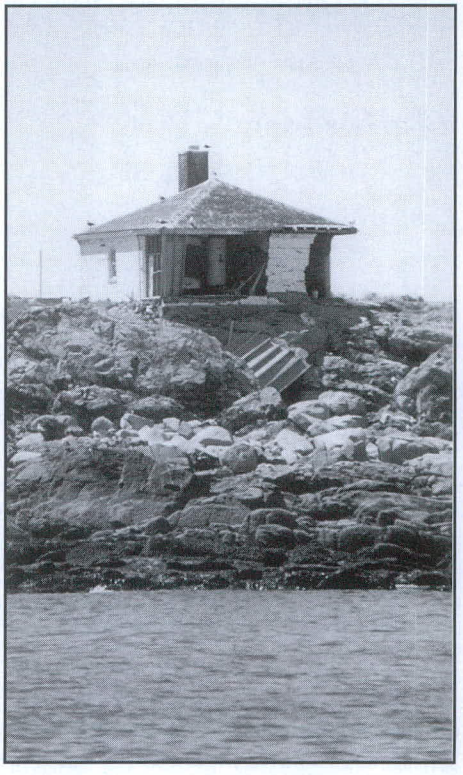


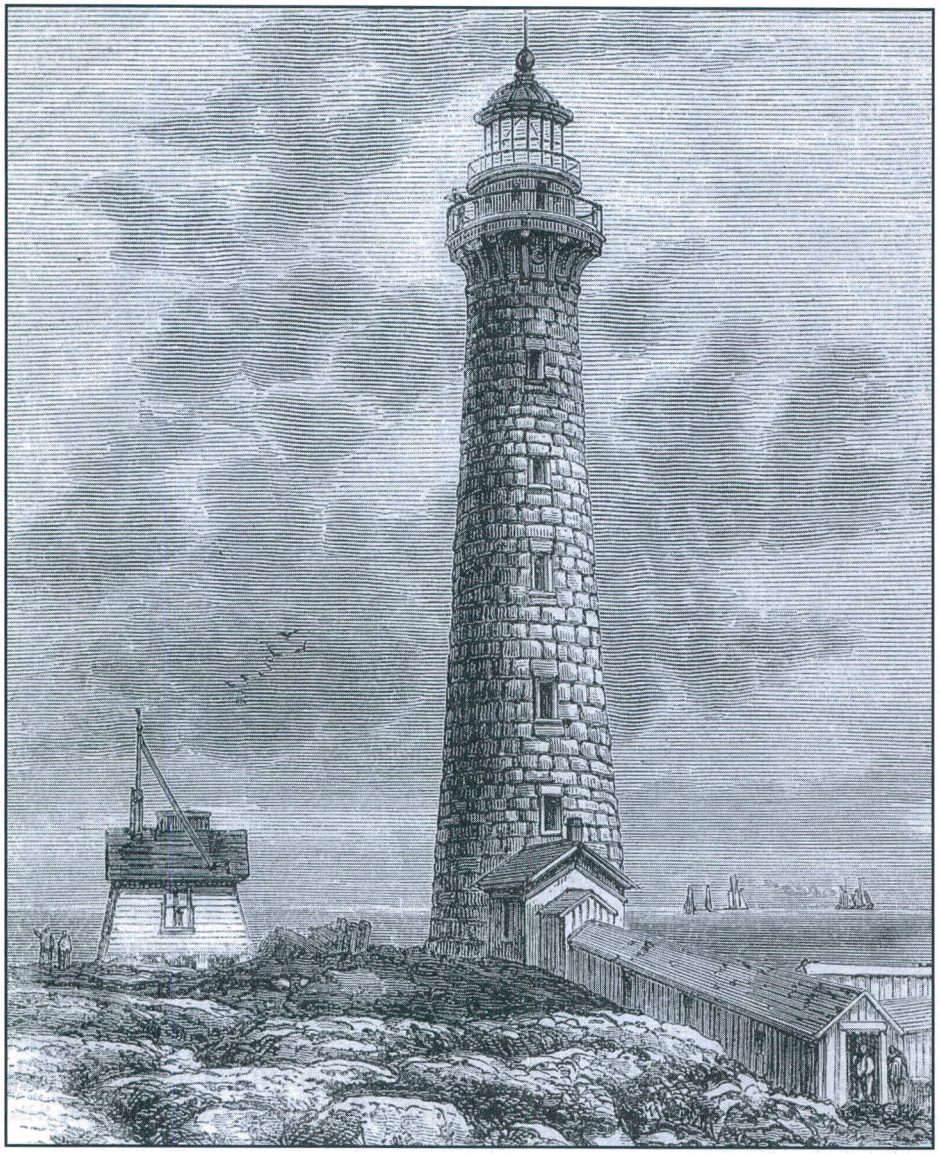
Right – Cape Ann whistle house as seen from the top of the south tower. The original fog signal at Cape Ann was a 10" steam powered whistle in duplex. In 1916 a diaphone replaced the whistle. In 1964 an electronic ELG 300 horn replaced the diaphone. Courtesy of the Thacher Island Association.

Below –The Cape Ann Light Station whistle house constructed in 1888 to replace the original signal building constructed in the 1860s. Lighthouse Service drawing.

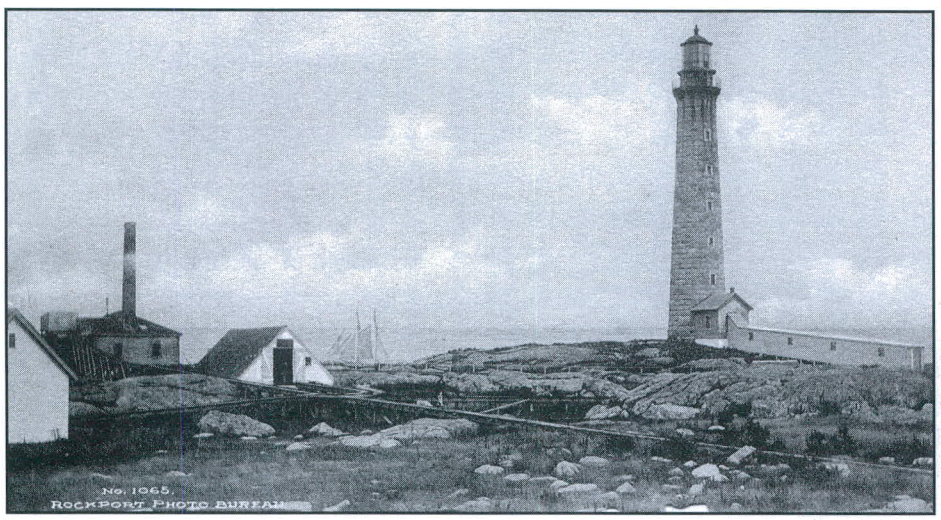


Below – Whistle house showing damage from the Perfect Storm of 1994. The entire east face was ripped off. Courtesy Roberta Ranney.





The caption for this 19th century Harper's Weekly engraving states, "Thatcher's Island (Cape Ann, Massachusetts), light and fog signal." We think the small structure was the storm signal station established on the island in 1874. Thacher is spelled incorrectly in the caption.



A 1917 post pard showing the south tower, wood storage building (at end of tramway) and whistle house. The post card reads, "Friends, The name of this lighthouse is familiar I know and I'd like to see inside, but that isn't permissible during these war times…"

Recent History – Down To One Tower – 1932-1989

The government first proposed the discontinuance of the north light in 1912. *The Boston Transcript* published an editorial condemning the idea, and many Gloucester fishermen protested the change. These complaints delayed the inevitable for another 20 years, but in 1932 the north light was extinguished. A submarine cable that had been laid to the island in 1902 provided power for the south tower, which was intensified to 70,000 candlepower. On May 3, 1932 it was reported that the master of the steamship *Falmouth* saw the newly intensified south light from a distance of 44 miles, an unusual distance for any lighthouse and due to the curvature of the earth and height of the tower impossible, unless the light was reflected off cloud cover.

In 1970 the General Services Administration (GSA) announced that the North tower was now considered surplus property and that it was about to begin disposal proceedings. To the people of Cape Ann the loss of even one twin tower was unacceptable.

In early 1971, the town appointed a committee to urge all citizens and their congressman to protest the abandonment of the light station. The committee and town people spent 10 years negotiating to save the towers. Eventually the north end of the island (about 22 acres) was transferred from the Coast Guard to the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (now known as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) in 1972. It is a refuge and nesting habitat to gulls and terns and resting and feeding ay station for migrating birds. The town leased this north end from the Bureau.

In October of 1971, the property was listed in the National Register of Historic places.

The Thacher Island Town Committee (TITC) was formed in 1976 to care for and maintain the north end of the island. In 1980, the Coast Guard keepers departed the island and the town signed a license/lease with the Coast Guard. The town appointed a new civilian keeper. That same year the south light tower and the fog signal were automated. The first order Fresnel lens was removed from the South Tower and is now on display at the Coast Guard Academy Museum in New London, Connecticut.

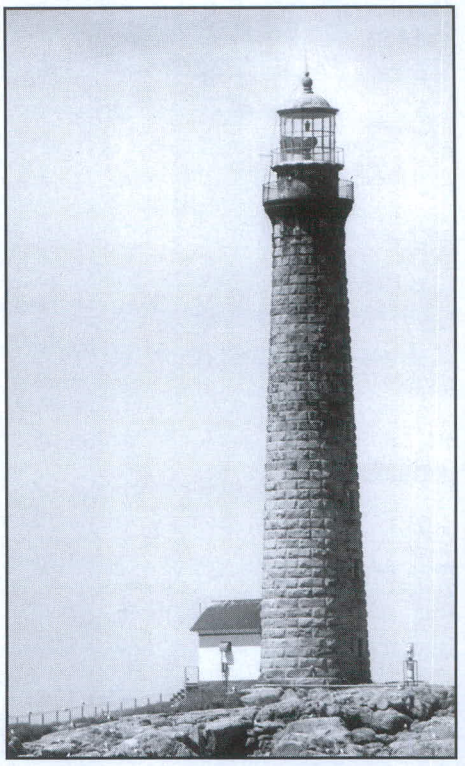
In 1981 the Thacher Island Association (TIA) was formed as a fundraising arm of the TITC. TIA added to their by-laws in 1983 that it would "assist in the preservation of the national historic landmark and the wildlife sanctuary, stimulate interest in the recreational use of the Island, and promote public funding of the costs of developing and maintaining the Island as 'a little national park' through voluntary contributions of money and donated materials and labor." The late Ned Cameron and other concerned citizens of Cape Ann, who formed the Thacher Island Association, chose a caretaker to live on the island. The first man chosen for the job was Russell Grubb, a retired bank employee. Grubb eventually assembled a menagerie of sheep, goats, a dog and a cat to keep him company. He self-published a book, *Thacher Island: An Adventure.* In it he wrote, "One must imagine being here with me on a typically beautiful day, with the contrasting blues of sky and sea combining with the multicolors of the flowering bushes, poison ivy leaves and all the other blossoming plant life which abounds in all directions." After a year on the island, Grubb gave way to a succession of other resident caretakers. George and Dottie Carroll had a six-year stint as caretakers and are still very active in the Thacher Island Association. "I always wanted to live on a farm by the sea," said Dottie Carroll, "but I never expected to."

A New Era – 1989 to the Present

In 1989 the north light tower was restored and opened to visitors, offering a panoramic view of the area. The north tower has since been relighted as a Private Aid to Navigation and is maintained by the Thacher Island Town Committee. Its amber light once again makes Thacher Island the only operating twin light tower station in the United States. The 40-watt fluorescent light in the north tower shines 24 hours a day. The optic in the south tower is now solar powered and is maintained by the Coast Guard.

For several years the Thacher Island Association operated a boat to take visitors and association members to the island from the "T" Wharf in Rockport. However, the landing ramp was damaged during the "Perfect Storm" of 1991, and the island went without tourists for a year as repairs took until 1994 to complete. In the harsh winter of 1995, the boat ramp was completely destroyed. That winter it was decided that it was too dangerous to staff the island with keepers after losing the boat ramp. It was deemed too hazardous to get on and off the island. Up until then, civilian keepers had kept watch over the Island and a Keeper Training Program was developed and keepers were on the island on a seasonal basis May through October.

Nineteenth Century hi-jinks at the south tower dwelling. Note the north tower in the background and the assistants' dwelling for that tower at extreme left. Photo courtesy of Thacher Island Association.



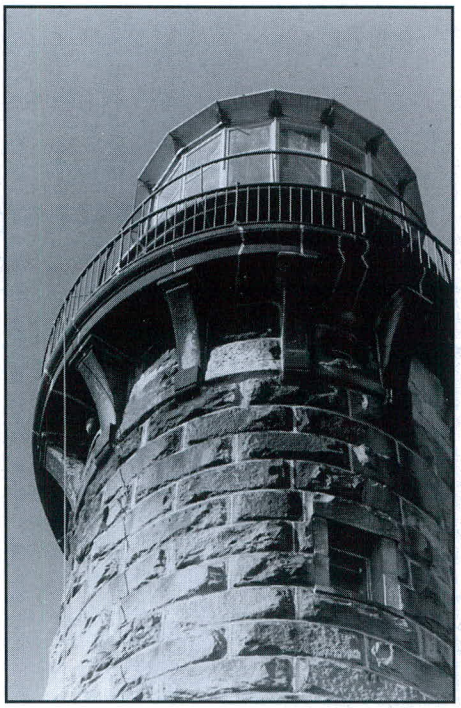
Cape Ann's north tower shortly after it was restored by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. 1994 photo by Bobby Ranney.

In 1998, U. S. Representative John F. Tierney secured $250,000 for a new boat ramp as part of a Congressional appropriations Bill. This funding, combined with money raised by the Thacher Island Association and the Rockport Town Committee's revenue sharing funds, meant that a new ramp could be rebuilt. Work on the 120-foot ramp was completed in the fall of 2000. Since the summer of 2001, caretakers are again living on the island, and volunteers have been busy working on the buildings and clearing the island's paths.

In the spring of 2000 a new Coast Guard "Keeper Class" buoy tender was launched, the *Maria Bray,* named for the heroic wife of Civil War-era keeper Alexander Bray. On its way to its homeport in Mayport, Florida, the vessel stopped for a ceremony near Thacher Island. Members of the Thacher Island Association were on board as Commander David Foley told the incredible tale of how Maria Bray kept the lights going through the winter storm in 1864. A wreath was placed in the ocean in her honor.

On January 3, 2001, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt designated Cape Ann Light Station on Thacher Island a National Historic Landmark, making it the ninth lighthouse station, and one fewer than 2,500 sites nation-

Above – Sally Wheeler inspects the amber 300mm optic placed in the north tower as a Private Aid to Navigation. Photographer unknown.



Right – A close up of the beautiful stonework of Cape Ann's north tower. The tower was re-pointed, interior cleaned and painted and small entrance structure replicated. Photographer unknown.

Cape Ann's duplex dwelling (foreground) and head keeper's dwelling. Photo courtesy of Thacher Island Association.

wide, to receive this designation. Paul St. Germain, President of the Thacher Island Association, said "This is a great honor for Rockport and an opportunity for us to attract private and public grants for our ongoing preservation efforts for this historic site."

In July 2002, the government officially turned over the southern two thirds of the island to the Town of Rockport. The Town of Rockport's Thacher Island Committee in partnership with the Thacher Island Association now maintains and operates the island, while the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which owns the northern third of the island, has a Memo of Understanding (MOU) that the Town may also maintain their section. The Coast Guard continues to maintain the solar-powered light in the South Tower as an official aid to navigation.

The TIA has inaugurated a major $400,000 restoration project that will focus on the ca. 1875 principal keeper's house. Phase I began in the fall of 2003 with the complete restoration of the exterior of the building, including a new roof, gutters, fascia, soffits, clapboards and windows. Future phases will include the restoration of the interior of the dwelling, which will eventually be used as a visitor's center, interpretive exhibit, classroom and accommodations for the summer volunteer keepers.

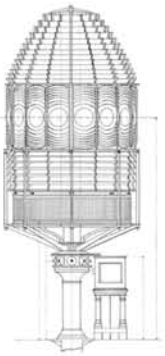
The island is now open to anyone who is able to get there on his or her own using small boats (like kayaks). Larger craft cannot land at the ramp, but there are three moorings that the public may use on a short-term basis.

The Thacher Island Association is offering its members transportation to the island on Saturday mornings from 9 to 11 a.m. during the summer, weather permitting. Reservations must be made by calling (978) 546-7697. Those wishing to camp on the island may obtain a permit by calling (978) 546-2326. The town also rents a six-room apartment to the public in the assistant keeper's house. For rental information, call (978) 546-2482.

For more information, or to join the Thacher Island Association, write to:
Thacher Island Association
P.O. Box 73
Rockport, MA 01966
Website: www.thacherisland.org

The author is President of the Association.

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation

Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

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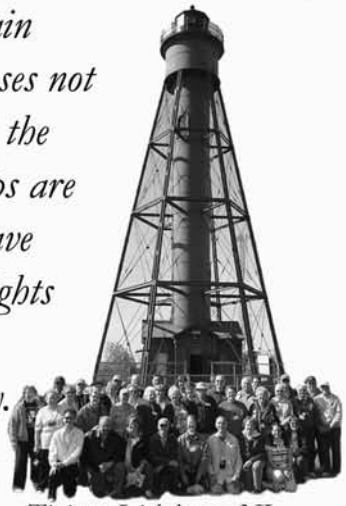
The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



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