

Eliphalet Grover at Boon Island, Maine, 1816-39

By Jeremy D'Entremont

Boon Island Lighthouse, established in 1811 several miles off the coast of southern Maine, was one of the most isolated and desolate of New England's light stations. The first keeper was David Oliver, a carpenter who had helped to build the station. Oliver soon resigned to serve as a mate on a Europe-bound ship.

Thomas Hanna, a sea captain originally from Scotland and the grandfather of the Cape Elizabeth Lighthouse hero Marcus Hanna, succeeded Oliver. Hanna resigned in May 1816. The next keeper, former mariner Eliphalet Grover, born in York, Maine, in 1778, served a remarkable 23 years at the station.

In April 1817, the *Portsmouth Oracle* reported that Grover had been awakened about 2 a.m. by the barking of his dog during a storm. Upon hearing "the crying of persons on the island," Grover dressed and went outside. At the south side of the island, the keeper discovered a small vessel, with its crew struggling to break free of the rocks.

Grover summoned his two sons to help. They swiftly launched a boat, and as they neared the other vessel the last words heard from it were, "Come out quick with your

boat." The vessel disappeared, and no sign of it could be found in the morning. Grover believed that it had gone to the bottom.

The poet and author Celia Thaxter described Boon Island Lighthouse in her 1873 book, *Among the Isles of Shoals*, as "the forlornest place that can be imagined." She related the memories of a man who had grown up on the island—possibly Eliphalet Grover's son, Samuel Grover. The man "described his loneliness as something absolutely fearful, and declared it had pursued him all through his life . . . He spoke with bitterness of his life in that terrible solitude."

In the winter of 1821, Eliphalet Grover passed the time by fashioning a fiddle from pieces of red spruce and pine roof shingles. In his 1894 history of York, George A. Emery wrote that Grover presented the fiddle to York's First Congregational Church in 1834. John S. Thompson, who was later appointed keeper at Boon Island, "extracted its dulcet and harmonious strains for the benefit of that congregation," according to Emery.

The "Boon Island fiddle" has survived for almost two centuries and is now in the collection of the Old York Historical Society. Steven Mallory, a musician and historic

preservation expert, has written that Grover's workmanship reflected "someone who was definitely an experienced, talented, and versatile joiner and carver, but who had little time or opportunity, and no necessity, to learn the finer points of violin making." Mallory restored the fiddle and used it to record a CD of old tunes.

Grover's log also resides at the Old York Historical Society. Here are some excerpts, preserving Grover's spelling:

March 6, 1829: The Sea racked my slip all to pieces. The lower part gone and middle part the bolts broken of and the upper part rotten and tumbled down so that it all wants to be made new.

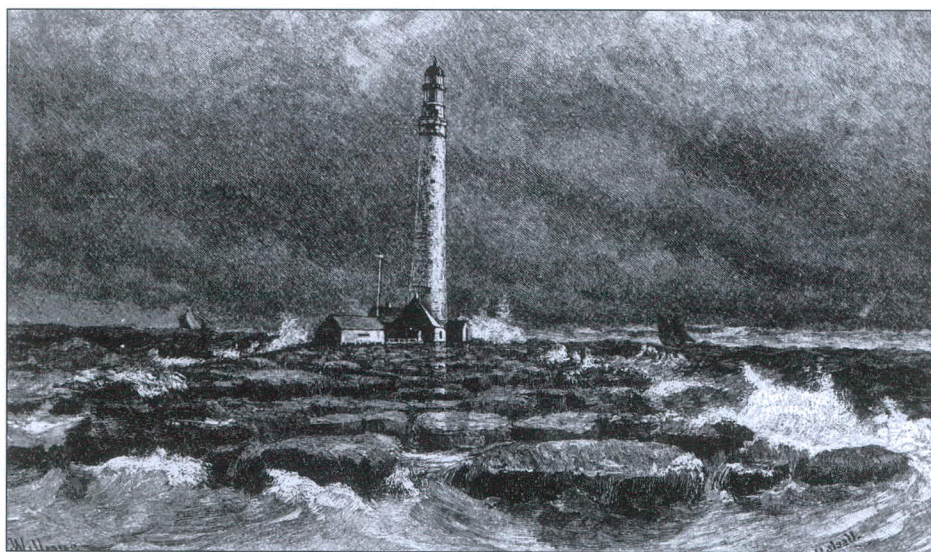
October 31, 1829: At 9 PM all my famely was forst to go to the Lighthouse and Stay until 5 next morning. At our return to the house found all our water gone and all the platforms gone and all my turnips and cabage washt away and my walls all Down. I have been hear 13 years 4 months 28 days and never see such a time before. The sea washd the small rocks from under the Lighthouse and Dwelling house the island was all under water for 4 hours.

July 1, 1830: My Boat got very much injured by beeing driven against thee rocks so that she cant bee repaired.

January 1831: 16 day and night the island all under water the most part of the time and the Sea and Large Rocks that washt up against the Slip has racked it to the westward Some parts of it 2 feet. From the 15 until the 17 as Dismel a time as I ever had sence I have Been on Boon island.

The roof of the lantern was replaced after the 1829 storm. By early 1831, the lighthouse was in such poor condition that it needed to be replaced. Congress appropriated \$4,000 for a new tower in March 1831, and the contractor hired to build the lighthouse was Seward Merrill of Gorham, Maine.

The first stone for the tower was laid on May 31, 1831. In an 1842 letter to Nathan



An early sketch of the Boon Island Lighthouse. Author's collection.

Cummings, superintendent of Maine's lighthouses, Grover wrote that the mortar used by the masons in the rubblestone tower "did not suit" him because "there was too much sand in it." He continued, "I made them put in more lime. From that time, until the lighthouse was done, the mortar was made well; all was made with fresh water and fresh sand, and I did my utmost to have it done well."

The new lighthouse went into operation on July 21. It stood 49 feet tall, with an octagonal wrought-iron lantern. The light was 69 feet above mean high water, with 12 lamps backed by 14-inch reflectors. After the new lighthouse was completed, Grover was ordered to take the 1811 tower down to height of 12 feet to be used for wood storage.

Lighthouse-keeping positions were political appointments at this time, and it was unusual for someone to serve an uninterrupted stint at a single station as long as Grover's. Attempts to wrest Grover from the position started as early as 1818, and he responded in a letter to the local lighthouse superintendent, "I hope that the government is not going to remove me to

gratify one man unless I have done something worthy of being removed. There is many people that would like well to have my pay but few would like the birth."

In 1837, a letter written by local resident Samuel Cushman called the keeper "a profane man, uncivil to those who visit the island" and charged that he had been living "in great intimacy" with his wife's sister. (Grover apparently was separated from his wife, who was ill.) Another local man accused Grover of assailing a government agent who was attempting to retrieve a buoy that had drifted to the island, "with a volley of vulgarity and abusive oaths seldom equaled any where else."

At a hearing in April 1838, Grover was absolved of charges of misconduct and destroying a buoy, but he had enemies in the community and his days on the island were numbered.

Newspapers published Grover's account of a storm in January 1839. The seas broke over the island, forcing Grover's family to take refuge in the tower. The ocean broke into the front of the dwelling and "unhung

the doors," sending seawater through the lower rooms. Water also entered the lighthouse tower, leaving shells and seaweed everywhere. An 80-foot covered walkway between the house and tower was swept away.

As the storm died down, the family "beheld an astonishing spectacle." Fragments of wood were scattered over the island, and boulders were torn from their former resting places. The high seas continued for three days after the storm.

Life on Boon Island was unrelentingly harsh, but Grover's saddest log entry came when he got word that he was being replaced:

May 10, 1839: Turnd of [*sic*] of Boon Island after Serving as Lighthouse Keeper 22 years and 10 months and 20 Day Without Cause.

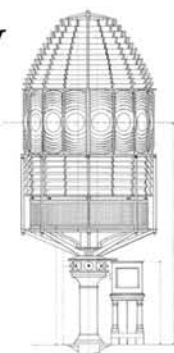
The present Boon Island Lighthouse, built in 1854, is licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard to the American Lighthouse Foundation. At 133 feet, it is the tallest lighthouse tower in New England.



A present-day photo of the Boon Island Lighthouse. Photo by the author.



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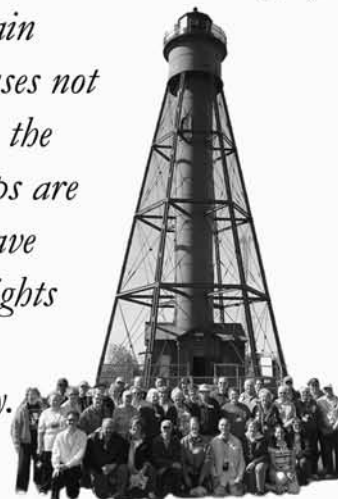
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