

EAGLE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

By Bob Fraser



The tower of the Eagle Island Light Station. One can see where the walkway to the house was attached. The fog bell building at right was added between 1908 and 1915. 1990 photo. Photographer unknown.

The Penobscot River originates deep in the forested wilderness of Maine and nearly splits the state in half. Early settlers found the river a ready-made highway to harvest the great wealth of timber in the region. In the period from 1832 to 1888, nearly 9 billion board feet went downriver to Bangor, making the city the "Lumber Port of the World" and later, the "Queen City." Nearly a hundred sawmills operating on the river cut the logs into standardized lengths which were then floated downriver to the falls where Bangor was built, then loaded aboard ships and sent around the world. In 1860, some 3,376 vessels arrived at Bangor. There were so many sawmills on the river in this time that a large island of sawdust was created. The river even inspired a choral symphony by local composer Thomas Oboe Lee.

So important was the lumber industry to America's economy that within a short time, four lighthouses were established marking the way to the river – Fort Point Light at the mouth of the Penobscot River in 1826, Dice Head Light at Castine (already a major seaport) in 1829, Saddleback Light at the south end of Isle au Haut Bay in 1839, and Eagle Island Light – where Isle au Haut Bay becomes East Penobscot Bay – also in 1839.

Even before all these lighthouses were constructed, the river was marked by two spindle buoys, on Buck's Ledge and Adam's (now Odoms) Ledge and six buoys, all established in 1831. Ice swept away the spindles and in 1837, stone tower monuments were built on Bucks, Adams, and Fort Point Ledges which are used today. Presently 17 buoys mark the river.

Eagle Island Point Light (as it was officially known until 1898) was built on the northeast point of the island by a Mr. Hindrith on a 6-acre plot conveyed to the U.S. Government

by owner John C. Gray on December 1, 1837. A local story claims that the beacon was to have been built on tiny Hardhead Island just across the channel. The lighthouse was a 25-foot-high, conical, rubblestone tower topped by a wrought-iron, octagonal lantern with a copper dome 6 feet 3 inches high and 7 feet 8 inches in diameter. A one-and-a-half story, rubblestone house was also built. First lit on the evening of September 28, 1838, it displayed a fixed white light from ten lamps in two tiers backed by 14-inch reflectors from 100 feet above the bay. It was supposedly visible for 12 miles. John Spear was the first keeper, making \$350 per year.

The lighthouse was first inspected by Lt. Thomas J. Manning in 1838 who reported it as "New - not yet lighted." The next inspection was done in the summer of 1842 by the redoubtable I.W.P. Lewis [nephew and critic of Winslow Lewis, ed.].

Lewis found the station in poor shape. Frost and ice had forced open the joints of the tower and the soapstone lantern deck and heaved out the brick arch which supported the lantern to the point that it was now supported by a timber. What caught his eye, however, was "one lamp and reflector are concealed on the north northwest side of the lantern by a copper door which faces the channel course to Penobscot Bay."

Nathan Philbrook, who became the second keeper in 1841, corroborated Lewis's remarks with a statement of his own. Philbrook said that the tower was a "rough and defective piece of work" and added that the contractor added enough lime to the mortar to "give colour to the sand." Hydraulic cement had not yet been discovered and the mortar of this time was a mixture of sand, lime, and water. My father once said that salt eats up lime "like ice cream," hence why highway bridges made of concrete need repairs after a winter of road salt. Lewis's reports often refer to the mortar as "damp sand." Philbrook added that he had just whitewashed the station and many defects were now hidden. He also pointed out the door obscuring what was the most important lamp of the ten.

Stephen Pleasanton added his survey of the opinions of seven local coastal skippers. They all agreed that the light was visible for 10 or 12 miles, that it was useful, but that it was badly built.

Lewis considered Eagle Island Light so important that he suggested it be made into a revolving beam.

On September 3, 1850, ten new lamps

were installed. The report said that the lamps burned 343 gallons of oil the previous year. It added that repairs to the lighthouse and a new boathouse were needed.

The 1857 *Financial Report* stated that Nash Island, Eagle Island, Dice Head, Burnt Island, Wood Island, and Goat Island Lights, all in Maine were to be rebuilt. The report of October 1, 1858, stated that only Goat Island had been rebuilt, that the others were repaired and lenses were installed. [Actually, these lighthouses had new, modern lantern rooms installed and eventually, Fresnel lenses, ed.]

Eagle Island Light was equipped with a 4th order fixed Fresnel lens in 1857 and the steady white beam shone from 106 feet above the sea and was visible 16-1/2 miles. One report listed the masonry shaft as 25 feet high, another 30 feet.

A new wooden dwelling, 35-by-25 feet, framed in hemlock and clapboarded in pine, was also built in 1857, replacing the old stone house. It had three rooms downstairs, four bedrooms upstairs, and a workshop ell connecting it to the tower. When it was torn down in 1963, an onlooker saw that it had three layers of siding and two layers of roof shingles. Steam heat was added in 1908 and an inside toilet in 1949. A barn nearby (for cows, hay, and general storage) was rebuilt in 1914 and a chicken house was added in 1919. The boat house was rebuilt in 1874, enlarged with a slip in 1901, but, oddly, torn down in 1934. A new brick oil house, holding 1,000 gallons both for the lamps and household use, was built in 1894. A coal shed, holding 8 tons, workshop, and toilet, was constructed in 1901.

Fresh water came from two springs near the lighthouse until 1947, when it was decided to dig a well. The water proved brackish and the water was then pumped ashore from the tenders. A cistern in the cellar of the house caught rainwater for washing.

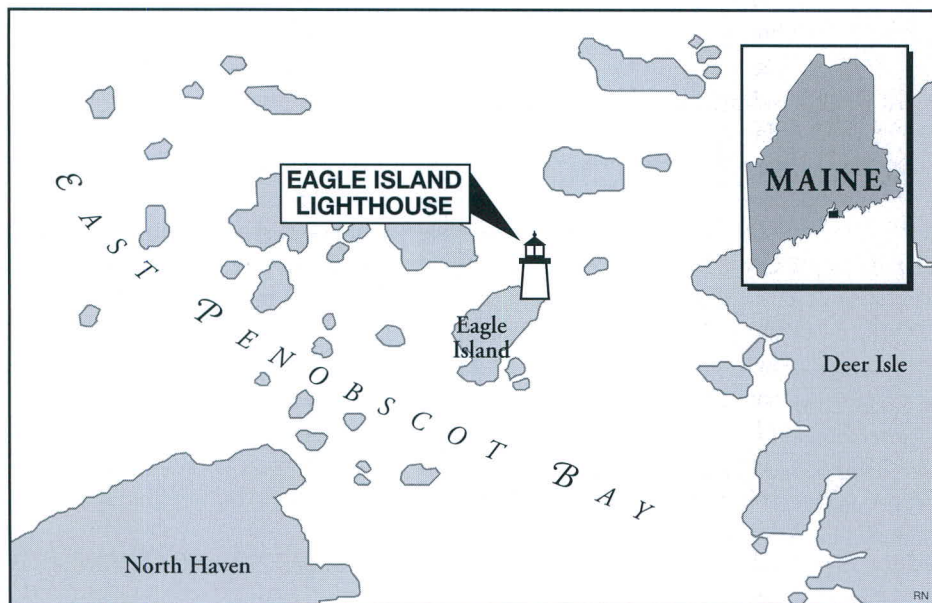
The keepers rowed to nearby Deer Isle, about two miles, for supplies. All of the supplies were landed on the beach at Lighthouse Cove, northwesterly of the station, and lugged up the bluff on a narrow trail. Tender crews, delivering the year's supply of oil, carried the fuel up by neck yokes holding two five-gallon cans. If the wind was northerly, it was too rough in the cove and the supplies were landed on the southerly side of the point and transported up a more difficult trail. In 1894, a stairway of 76 steps was built at this location, making the job easier. Later, the oil was pumped through a hose to the oil house.

A 4,200-pound fog bell, cast in Boston in 1897, was placed at the lighthouse. It was on a gallows, the keeper struck it in answer to a ship's fog horn. In 1932, the usual white wooden pyramidal bell tower was built and the bell was then struck by machinery - once every 20 seconds.

At this time, Eagle Point Light Station was listed as a fixed white light of 680 candlepower, from an oil mantle lamp, inside a 4th order lens, 106 feet above the bay and visible 13 nautical miles.

In *A Family Island in Penobscot Bay, The Story of Eagle Island*, John C. Enk wrote a lot about the lighthouse and included biographies of most of the keepers. All of the civilian keepers and most of the Coast Guard ones were 'Mainers.'

Robert T. Sterling, Assistant Keeper of Portland Head Light Station, took a busman's holiday in 1934 to visit all the Maine beacons, and wrote *Lighthouses of the Maine Coast*. Frank E. Bracy was keeper of Eagle Island Light then. He had served aboard the PORTLAND lightship and he told Sterling "that if anyone wants to get a good thrill on the ocean, they want to just spend a month's vacation on a lightship and they will be well satisfied to come ashore when the time comes." Bracy then became keeper of Seguin Light Station, which he said "had the most powerful foghorn on the coast" and after a number of years he "still had the sound of it in his ear." Bracy told Sterling that he never took chances landing or leaving his island lighthouses, hence he never had an accident. Sterling added that Eagle Island Light



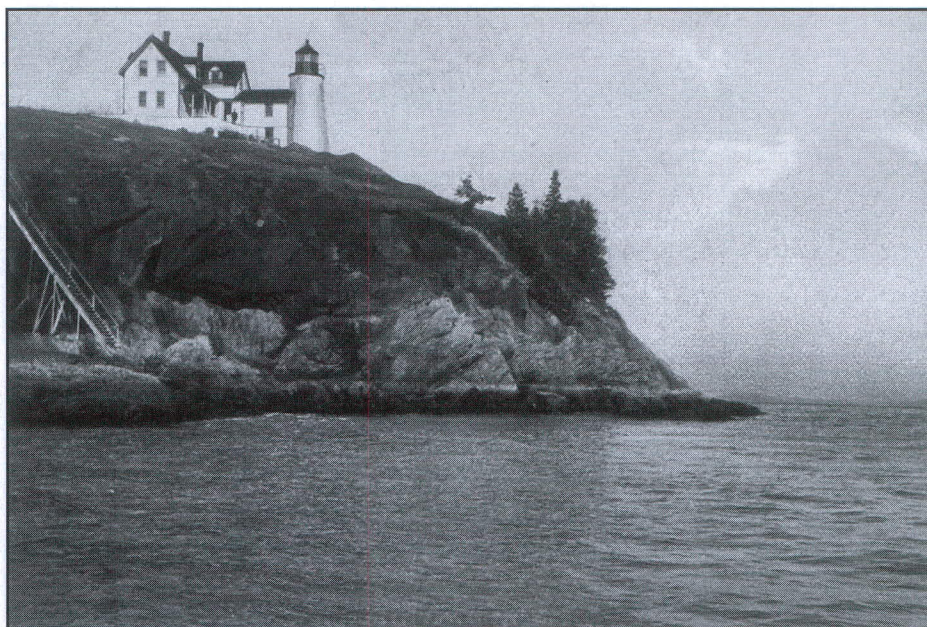
Station was the favorite of keepers.

Eagle Island Light was made automatic in 1959. A 300 mm lens replaced the classical Fresnel lens and an electric lamp was installed, run off a bank of batteries which were recharged by a diesel generator. The light became flashing white every 4 seconds, at about 800 candlepower and visible 9 miles. The fog bell was discontinued at this time, replaced by gong buoy 3A located just off the point.

In 1963 the Coast Guard was alarmed by severe vandalism at the Cuckolds Light Station. They decided to destroy all but the light tower on Eagle Island. The islanders tried to stop this but to no avail. Since they couldn't stop the demolition, they hoped to salvage some useful and/or historic parts and were aghast when the Coast Guard speedily pulled down the house and set it afire. The other buildings fed the fire, the bell tower alone escaped.

The Coast Guard attempted to save the bell but it got away from them and went over the cliff into the ocean. It was then abandoned. Sometime later, lobsterman Walter Shepard of Deer Isle noticed the bell deep in the water. As many New Englanders were, Shepard was also a caretaker on Great Spruce Head Island. He told his employer, artist John F. Porter, about the bell and the two made plans to retrieve it. Today, the bell is at the island estate.

A weekly mail boat runs from Deer Isle to Eagle Island but the lighthouse is closed to visitors.



Eagle Island as depicted in an old post card, circa 1910. Note the staircase from the beach at extreme left.

KEEPERS OF EAGLE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

compiled by John C. Enk

LIGHTHOUSE SERVICE

John Spear	1838-1841
Nathan Philbrook	1841-1843
John Spear (again)	1843-1848
His widow	Jan, 1848 - Jan, 1849
William Smith	1849-1853
R.C. Clay	1853-1858
Unknown	
R.C. Clay (again)	1859-1861
Rodney Witherspoon	1861-1871
A.P. Sweetland	1871-1883
John Ball	1883-1898
Howard Ball (son)	1898-1913
Lucy Ball, his widow	
	Feb. - March, 1913
Edward Farren	1913-1918
Charles Allen	1919-1931
Frank E. Bracy	1931-1945

COAST GUARD

Chester Burnham	1945-1946
Calvin Curtis	1946-1949
Ralph Banks	1949-1952
Edmund Sedgwick	1952-1955
Roy Louder	1955-1956
Edward Le Tendre	1956-1957
Wayne McGraw	1957-1959

January 1996

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

Some time ago I requested help in getting into a lighthouse where several members of my family were keepers for 30 years. Thanks to your efforts we had a family reunion on Eagle Island, ME and were not only allowed into the light, but were given an explanation of the workings – and the view was tremendous!

To walk where my dad, grandparents and great-grandparents walked, was an incredible experience – not to mention seeing the inside and walking on the outside [gallery deck] of the lighthouse.

Can you help me once again? Is it possible to view the logs from May 3, 1883 to March 23, 1913? [see opposite page, ed.].

This is the time period when my great-grandfather John Ball and grandfather Howard T. Ball were keepers of the Eagle Island Light . . .

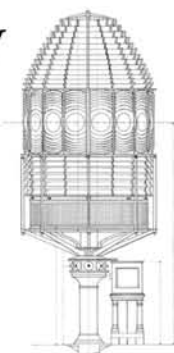
Norma Ball Gray

Excerpts from the Eagle Island Light Station Keeper's Log

- Dec. 25, 1877** – This is Christmas Day, the anniversary of peace and good towards all men and how we should love and revere the day, above all others.
- May 14, 1878** – My health has been poor for six months and the past week not so good as usual, I have got along with my work thus far and hope tonight I am on the mending hand.
- May 17, 1879** – The steamer *Iris* was here today with the Inspector and Lampist. Johnson. All right so far as orders and doing my duty was concerned, which was very gratifying to me.
- May 19, 1879** – . . . I have been hurrying all the time, cleaning, painting, white washing on the dock, on the quarters, building a fence for marking the garden, etc. The light keeps me up nearly all night, it requires a great deal of care and watchfulness – to have a good light – I wish the L.H. Board would go back to Lard Oil.
- Nov. 3, 1879** – I went to Camden, started early in the morning of this date and returned the next day, Nov. 4, at 4 p.m. I found things all right and a good report from those I left, my two children and a young man belonging to the island.
- Nov 27, 1880** – I left the station here Nov. 25, at 8 a.m. to go to Camden and I returned Nov. 27 at 2 a.m. My visit there was to look after my boy's schooling, store, private business, etc.
- Mar. 26, 1881** – I went to Camden yesterday and returned today, found things all right on my return, I left the light in charge of my older daughter.
- Jul. 2, 1881** – We heard with profound sorrow and regret the death of President Garfield today by assassination.
- Nov. 22, 1881** – Ten years ago yesterday, Nov. 21, 1871, I took charge of this station as Keeper and I hope and think that I have given satisfaction and will say that all officers and men connected with the L.H. Service here have treated me with the utmost kindness and respect, never once to my recollection having spoken an unpleasant word to me or about me, for which I am truly grateful.
- Mar. 15, 1883** – The Keeper, my father, is sick. Had Dr. here from Camden brought by the Revenue Cutter *Levi Woodbury*. The buoy is full of floating ice . . . hope father will be about in a few days.
- March 28, 1883** – Today father is better. Had Dr. from Deer Isle. The wind has been baffling all day, snow all first part of the afternoon. Ice is about all gone except around the shores.
- Apr. 7, 1883** – Father not any better
- Apr. 14, 1883** – The Keeper still very ill – we procured another physician, Dr. Rolfs of Camden, ME, Capt. Don called to inquire for the keeper.
- Apr. 18, 1883** – The Keeper died today of heart disease. A beautiful warm day, but one of sadness
- Apr. 19, 1883** – Cloudy and dreary. The Light Keeper's remains were taken to Camden for interment.
- Apr. 28, 1883** – Received a letter from the Inspector requesting me to remain here until an appointed keeper arrives.
- May 7, 1883** – Nothing new happened to record. Have been looking every day for the arrival of the appointed keeper, John Ball.
- May 10, 1883** – Capt. John Ball arrived today.
- May 14, 1883** – The family of the deceased light house keeper moved furniture today.
- Dec 4, 1898** – The U.S. Steamer *Myrtle*, called for the old L.H. lamps this morning. Boat house door smashed by the gale of December 3, 1898
- Aug. 20, 1900** – I saved the life of Richard Nill (eight years old) today from drowning.
- Nov. 25 1901** – The stone wall under the boat house washed out in this N.E. Gale and the seas were very heavy on the boat house.
- July 2, 1902** – Dr. Noyes of Stonington was here today to see Agnes.
- July 3, 1902** – Dr. Noyes and Dr. Westcott were here today to see Agnes.
- July 5, 1902** – Dr. Westcott was here again today and had very little hope for Agnes.
- July 7, 1902** – Agnes died this morning at 6:25. Age 7 years, 6 months, 14 days.
- July 13, 1903** – Left the station at 1 o'clock to carry my wife to the E.M.G. Hospital to have an operation performed for Appendicitis. I asked for a leave of absence, have not received it yet.
- Jun. 1, 1909** – I drove eight sheep off the lighthouse reservation today
- Jun 2, 1909** – Drove Quinn sheep of the lighthouse reservation three times today
- Jun 3., 1909** – Drove sheep out today but they come right back again.
- Jun. 4, 1909** – John Quinn's sheep are in the field about all the time.
- June 5, 1909** – I drove John Quinn's sheep out several times today.
- Feb. 1, 1910** – I sent my Elmer to Waldo Co. Hospital today.
- Feb. 16, 1910** – I left for Waldo Co. Hospital this a.m. at 7 o'clock.
- Feb 22, 1910** – Elmer died at the Waldo Co. Hospital this morning. . .
- Jan. 31, 1913** – Keeper died at 6:45 p.m. heavy snow.
- Mar. 14, 1913** – Received word today that Edward S. Farren had been appointed Keeper of this station and is soon to take charge.
- March 23, 1913** – Steamer *Zinzania* landed me here today (Mr. Farren) and found the station in very poor condition and Mrs. Ball left on the same vessel after noon.



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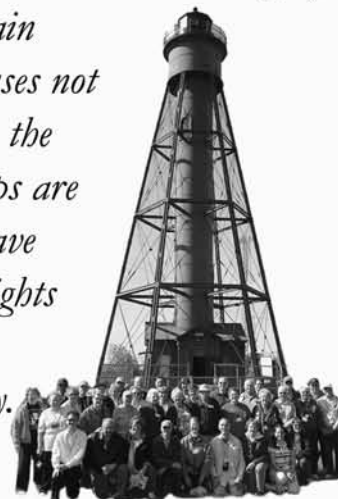
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