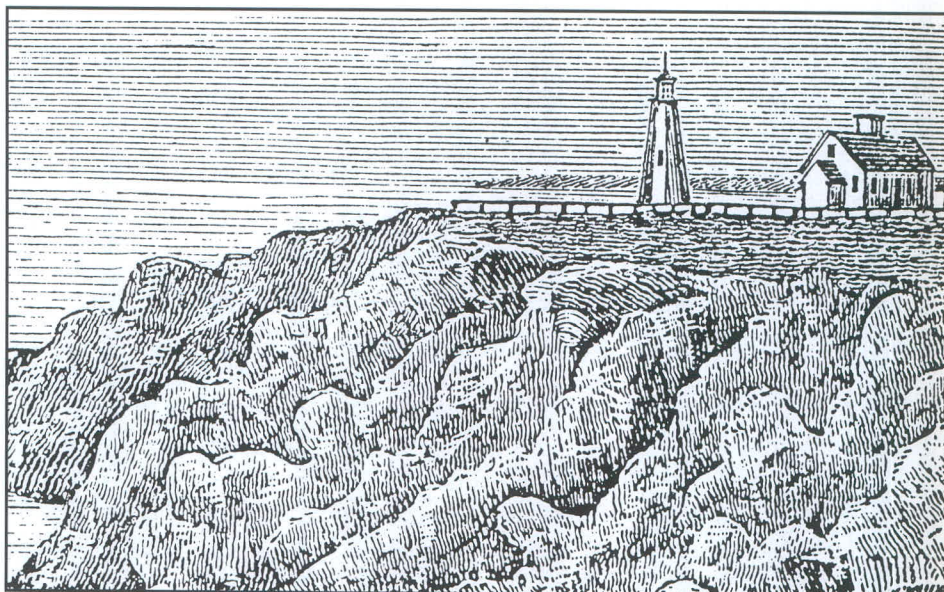


Gay Head Light- House



J.W. BARBER WOODCUT CIRCA 1838

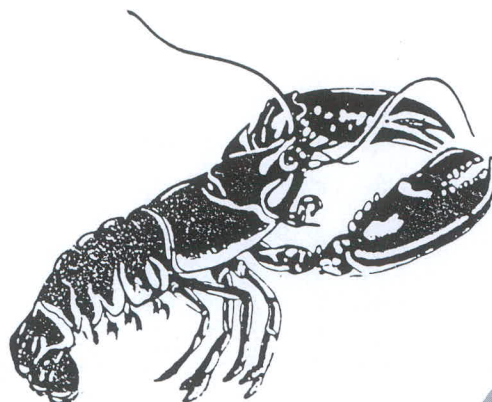
by Arthur R. Railton



T WAS A Nantucket politician, Peleg Coffin, Esq., who in 1796 wrote to his Congressman in Washington suggesting that "the convenience and interest of Nantucket" would be promoted if the Federal Government would build a lighthouse at Gay Head. Nobody on the Vineyard seemed interested.

What prompted State Senator Coffin to request a lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard is not known. Nantucket already had two beacons: Great Point, built by Massachusetts colony in 1784; and Brant Point, built in 1746 with funds raised from residents (operation, however, was financed by a tax on vessels of 15 tons or more using the harbor). The Vineyard had no lighthouse in 1796. The entire east coast of the country had only 15.

Whatever it was that motivated Coffin, the Congressman, "not being versed in nautical matters," passed along the request to the Department of the Treasury, headed by Alexander Hamilton. Tench Coxe, Hamilton's assistant, sought out a couple of opinions (one from Joseph Anthony, whose "position in Trade," Coxe informed Hamilton, required that his comments be kept "confidential").



★ Gay Head
Lighthouse

The outside opinions must have been favorable because Coxe recommended to Hamilton that a light “of inferior class” be built on Gay Head, if the “difficulty of providing a sufficient marked distinction” from other lights (Nantucket and Montauk) and “financial considerations which apply to the current year...can be got over.”

In the next Lighthouse Appropriations Bill submitted to Congress, the Gay Head project (\$5750) was included. Thus, in July 1798, Martha's Vineyard was on its way to getting its first lighthouse.

Edward Pope, then Collector of Customs at New Bedford, learned of the appropriation and wrote to President John Adams: “I'd like to be named supervisor...” His pay was based on the amount of money his office handled, so it would mean more income. The Treasury Department, October 31, 1798, approved his request and instructed him to have the Gay Head site surveyed and cost estimates made. Pope got right to work, had the site surveyed by John Howland of New Bedford and on December 29th recommended to the Department that a 50-foot tower be built. In February, the Governor of Massachusetts, after a word from Alexander Hamilton, deeded two acres and four rods on Gay Head to the United States stipulating that “if the said United States shall neglect for the term of Four Years from the date of this Grant to erect a Light House...and after the same shall be erected, shall neglect to keep the same in good repair and a state useful to Navigation then this Grant shall be void.”

Six weeks later, William Miller, Commissioner of Revenue, Department of Treasury, informed Pope that all was in order and he should solicit bids for a 50-foot lighthouse, plus a small house for the keeper and a well to be dug if there was no spring (little did he know about the water problems at Gay Head).

At about the same time, General Benjamin Lincoln, Collector of Customs at Boston, wrote to Treasury stating that he had visited the Gay Head site and that, in his opinion, the light should be only 40 feet high, so that it could not be seen from Buzzard's Bay, to prevent mariners

from being confused. Lincoln, doubtless, wanted the new light to fall under his jurisdiction.

His suggestion about height was apparently ignored because on June 7, 1799, the *New Bedford Medley* published an advertisement inviting bids for building a wooden tower “in the form of an octagonal...diameter 24 feet [at the base]...height 47 feet.” The tower was to support a lantern, six feet in diameter and seven feet high, inside which “a good circular lamp of two feet in diameter is to be placed.”

Also to be built was a keeper's dwelling, 17 feet by 26 feet, having a parlor, kitchen and bedroom, also a barn, 15 feet square, an underground oil vault and a well, 20 to 30 feet deep. Bids were to be in by June 10, 1799.

On June 7, just three days before the bids closed, Martin Lincoln, son of the above-mentioned General Lincoln, wrote to Edward Pope seeking the contract: “Having considered the subject I now pledge myself to you that I will find all the materials, etc., and perform all the work free from any after bills whatever, for the sum of two thousand eight hundred and seventy-five dollars.” He was, as William Miller informed Secretary Hamilton on June 19, the low bidder: “Martin Lincoln, son of General Lincoln, is several hundred dollars lower than any of the rest.”

Young Lincoln's letter to Pope has a notation in the lower left-hand corner: “Quincy, June 28, 1799. Approved. John Adams.” For those who can't keep historical dates in mind, John Adams was President of the United States at the time.

The contract ordered Lincoln to “erect, build and finish in a workmanlike manner on or before the twentieth day of November next, a light house with its appurtenances...at Gay Head.” He wasted no time and on July 26th, his father, the General, wrote to Miller at Treasury that “the business is in great forwardness. The buildings are framed and the lantern nearly finished. In two days, it [the lantern] will be on the spot.”

By September the work was nearly finished and Pope wrote to the Treasury Department that “Mr. Lincoln, contrac-

tor, says he will be through in three weeks and wants to know who to turn it over to.” In his response, which didn't answer Pope's questions, Miller stated his concern about the possible confusion by mariners of the Gay Head Light with Montauk Light. Maybe, he suggested, the problem could be solved by adding a second light (Ed. Tower): “I presume that a lamp of double the size of the common street lamp and capable of holding sufficient oil to burn through the night might be raised from the trap door of the dwelling...it should be well oiled to prevent it from rusting.”

A most naive proposal from the man responsible for the nation's lighthouse establishment! Pope was confused and decided to go to Gay Head before responding. Upon his return, he wrote Miller: “Just returned from Gay Head. All is well with the building. We must now place the lantern in it and it must be distinct from Montauk.” To make it distinctive, he proposed that the lamp be “an ellipse,” estimated cost \$300, a price he felt might be too high.

A supplier of oil and materials to lighthouses under government contract, William Rotch of New Bedford, on September 28, 1799, wrote to Miller proposing that Capt. Owen Hillman of Martha's Vineyard be appointed keeper at Gay Head. Most of his letter, though, was on another subject: “As this light house is in a neighborhood of peaceful natives who are industrious and temperate, it is the fear of some of the most considerate that the Superintendent may injure them by selling them liquor and, feeling much concern for that people, we hope it will meet thy views to have him put under positive restrictions thereupon.”

Rotch was late with his recommendation for keeper, but his second request was honored. Miller notified Pope, on September 27, that the President “has appointed Ebenezer Skiff keeper of the Gay Head Light.” However, it was General Lincoln in Boston who had the pleasure of telling Skiff of his good fortune. He wrote to Skiff on October 3, 1799: “I am informed by the President of the United States that he has appointed

you keeper of the Light House on Gay Head; am requested to inform you that if you accept the appointment, you must live in the house built for the keeper of the Light, and not deputise any person to keep it under you, and also that you must not become a retailer of ardent spirits, for many people have informed him that a measure of this kind would destroy the Indians. Whether they are supplied or not by you, if supplied they must be ruined, if not supplied, it would produce such discontent as to destroy their present quiet and happiness. These are conditions which will always be annexed to the appointment. I am your obedient servant, B. Lincoln."

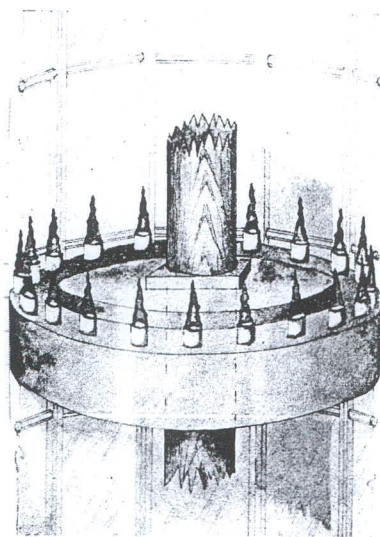
General Lincoln's letter raises a question. Did he recommend Skiff to the President for the Gay Head post? If so, why? Ebenezer Skiff, a Chilmark resident, was a sometime teacher and lawyer, 49 years old at the time. His family was from Sandwich and he married a girl from Plymouth. The fact that Lincoln notified Skiff of his appointment makes it seem most likely that he was his sponsor.

Pope, who apparently did not write to Skiff, informed Miller that same week that the buildings were finished and the contractor should be paid. Much was written about the tower and the dwelling and "appurtenances," but nothing about the lamp which would provide the illumination. Nor was there any word about how it would be kept distinct from Montauk and Nantucket.

Very little information seems to have survived about early illuminants used in lighthouses. There is speculation that the first light in the New World, Boston Bay Light built in 1716, originally burned candles, but soon changed to oil. At the time Gay Head was built there were fewer than 20 light houses operating and they probably all used rather crude oil lamps, known as spider lamps, "a shallow container of whale oil with a number of wicks in it." There was a large circular wick in the center and around the center wick was a series of flat wicks. No chimneys were used and the whole thing created considerable smoke. All early lights were simple fixed beacons until 1798 when "a Cape Cod lighthouse was

equipped with a screen revolving around the oil lamps so that their light would be obscured at intervals." This may have been what Pope meant by "an ellipse." If the Gay Head Light did have such an interrupting device on it, there is nothing about it in the records. It seems likely, however, that with the Treasury Department showing such concern about confusion with Montauk that some distinction must have been provided.

Although Collector Pope in New Bedford seemed to be doing all the work, General Lincoln in Boston continued to act as though Gay Head was his responsibility. In his regular report to William Miller, Commissioner of the Revenue, on October 18, 1799, Lincoln listed Gay Head Light: "By whom kept: Ebenezer Skiff; State of Light House: New."



The lighthouse was new and the keeper was Skiff, but the light was not operating on October 18, 1799, although General Lincoln probably was not aware of that. The first report of the light being in operation seems to be in a letter from Edward Pope to Miller, January 28, 1800, in which he enclosed the final bills for "building the Light House and appendages at Gay Head...the keeper of the Light House has not been informed what the amount of his salary is to be nor whether his firewood is to be found him or not. It is his wish that it may, at least a limited quantity. The access to the place is such that makes it come high and difficult to be procured...The keeper considers himself entered on his service the 7th day

of November last—the lamps were not lighted until the 18th of the same month...The light is said to be well tended.

"The keeper wishes to be supplied with posts and nails or any other material that may serve for enclosing the land set off to the Light House...There can be no doubt of the necessity of fencing..."

It was not until March 4, 1800, four months after he started work, that Skiff learned how much he would be paid: \$200 a year, but, Pope was told, "we cannot pay for his wood." The same salary was paid to keepers at Cape Cod Light and Newport.

We don't know what Skiff thought of his salary, but we do know he was not happy with the house Martin Lincoln had built. In April 1800, he wrote Pope a letter of complaint which the New Bedford Collector relayed to Miller: "The keeper of the Light House on Gay Head finds his dwelling house very inconvenient for want of a porch, has no where to put his Iron ware, water vessels, etc., his cellar proving very wet, being half full of water for most of the winter and spring." A few months later, Skiff repeated his complaint about the need for a porch.

Pope must have inquired of Skiff why he was using more oil because in October 1800 the keeper reported back that "the lamp was first lighted on the 18 November 1799. Being unexperienced at first I made the wicks too small which consumed less oil."

By the time General Lincoln finally realized that Gay Head Light was not under him. He wrote to Miller: "As I have not heard anything from the keeper since his appointment, I concluded that he is under the direction of the Collector of New Bedford."

Clearly, the lighthouse organization of the period was a loose, disorganized one, with keepers being left to their own devices most of the time. Lincoln and Pope were Collectors of Customs, an important well-paid job, and knew nothing and probably cared little about lighthouses. The Treasury Department, recently moved to Washington from Philadelphia, also seemed to have little

interest in lighthouses at the time. The reason may have been political. The summer and fall of 1800 was the time of the nation's first election campaign, its first taste of "politics." President Adams, Federalist, was being challenged by the party of Jefferson, Republican. The non-establishment Republicans (later called Democrats) won, upsetting, no doubt, people like General Lincoln, Pope and the Vineyard Mayhews. On the Island, the Federalists remained in power, of course, as they did in Massachusetts, which strongly supported its native son, Adams.

General Lincoln, an aging Federalist who might have been wondering what would happen to him under the new Administration (he later resigned and was replaced by Henry Dearborn), hastened on December 2, the day before the electoral college voted the Federalist Adams out, to write to Miller at the Treasury Department: "It would be a pleasing circumstance to my son to have the account closed as soon as may be and to know that his bond given for the faithful performance of his contract for building a Light House on Gay Head is cancelled." The Government was apparently slow in paying.

Skiff continued on as keeper despite the change in parties in Washington and he continued to complain. Pope, who also survived the Republican victory, wrote to Miller in Washington that "the keeper [at Gay Head] complains very much of his house—has wrote me several times on the subject...I believe he does not complain without a cause. A House in so bleak a situation ought to be built in the tightest manner possible..." And he repeated Skiff's request for a porch.

In November, 1802, Skiff must have gotten his porch. Pope reported: "Expense of building the addition to the Dwelling House on Gay Head will be about 130 dollars. This addition is nearly finished."

But Ebenezer Skiff was not one to be satisfied by a mere porch. He thought he should be getting more than \$200 a year and he stated his case in a letter to Pope August 20, 1803:

"...the land is very poor and is only two acres...but so much of it as I have



The second keepers house, circa 1875. Notice the keeper cleaning the lantern room storm panes and the other gent posing with the telescope. The ventilator of the lantern is an unusual design for an American tower. Photo courtesy of the Dukes County Historical Society.

manured fully answered the purposes you expected. I cannot do without the use of a horse which I am obliged to keep in a common pasture which is a considerable distance from me...my firewood is costly...the spring of water does not affect a sufficiency in the summer. I depend chiefly upon my salary for the support of my family. I have enclosed...a certificate from the Selectmen stating my situation."

Supporting their constituent, the Chilmark selectmen, Matthew Mayhew, Jr., Ephraim Mayhew and Stephen Tilton, wrote:

"We, the subscribers, Selectmen of Chilmark, hereby certify that Ebenezer Skiffe, keeper of the light house on Gayhead in said Town, dwells about four miles from a district school, nine miles from the meetinghouse and nearly the same distance from a gristmill—the way is hilly and bad and in the common way of passing there are creeks which are scarcely fordable at all seasons. The spring in the Clift where he dwells yields poor water at best and will not afford a sufficiency for a family. In dry seasons he has to cart water from a brook nearly one mile distant—his firewood must be brought by water and is not so easily ob-

tained there as in seaport towns—he has strictly conformed to the restrictions respecting the retailing of ardent spirits, which restrictions were annexed to his appointment and which were occasioned by a request from persons of considerations who consulted the interest of the Indians—his situation is uncommonly boisterous and the pasturage which he is obliged to hire of the natives is generally very inconvenient. Said Skiffe we esteem a reputable man faithful to the publick and deserving of encouragement."

Skiff waited patiently for two years, but no increase in salary was forthcoming so on October 25, 1805, he wrote again, this time directly to Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury:

"Sir: Clay and Oker of different colours from which this place derived its name ascend in a Sheet of wind pened by the high Clifts and catch on the Light House Glass, which often requires cleaning on the outside—tedious service in cold weather, and additional to what is necessary in any other part of the Massachusetts.

The Spring of water in the edge of the Clift is not sufficient. I have carted almost the whole of the water used in my family during the last Summer and until this

Month commenced, from nearly one mile distant.

These Impediments were neither known nor under Consideration at the time of fixing my Salary.

I humbly pray you to think of me and (if it shall be consistent with your wisdom) increase my Salary.

And in duty bound I am your's to command,

EBENEZER SKIFF

Keeper of Gayhead Light House"

Despite the Jeffersonian passion for economy Skiff got his request granted and his salary was increased to \$250, up \$50 a year.

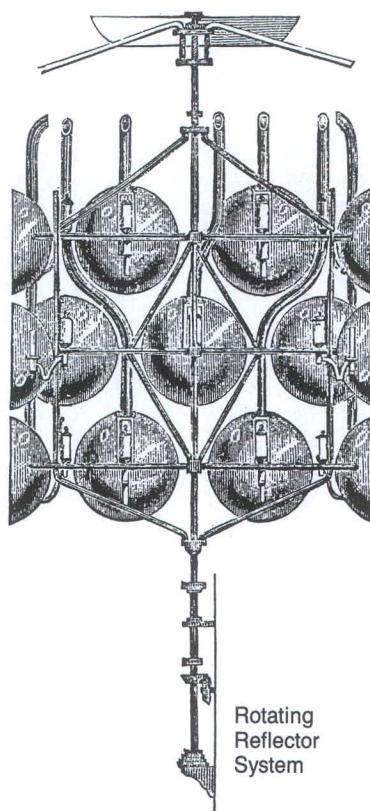
New England was strongly anti-Jefferson, not only because of its Federalist majorities but because of the Embargo Act and later the Non-intercourse Act which shut down most of the shipping industry, a major one for Yankees. Despite this conflict, or perhaps because of it, Secretary Gallatin authorized a new lantern for Gay Head Light and the rebuilding of the upper section of the tower in 1809. Apparently, Lincoln's "workmanlike manner" had had some serious deficiencies.

The Jefferson administration had been rather indifferent to the Light House establishment, being preoccupied with such major issues as the Louisiana Purchase, the war with Tripoli, the Burr-Hamilton duel, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the Yazoo Frauds and the adoption of the 12th Amendment. Complaints about the inadequacy of our lights were increasingly being voiced by mariners. One such complainer was an unemployed sea captain from Cape Cod, Winslow Lewis, who claimed he could provide better lights at lower cost. Out of work because of the Embargo Act, he developed a new optical system which he patented in 1810 and demonstrated on lighthouses in the Boston area. There was no doubt that his lights were better than the existing lights, but there was some question whether they were up to the state of the art at the time.

Frederick Talbot in his book *Lightships and Lighthouses* states...

"...Lewis, who confessed that he knew nothing about light optics, patented

what he called a 'magnifying and reflecting lantern' for lighthouse work, which he claimed was a lamp, a reflector and a magnifier, all in one. It was as crude a device as has ever emanated from an inventive brain, but the designer succeeded in impressing the Government so effectively that they gave him \$20,000 for his invention. The reflector was wrought of thin copper with a silvered surface, while the magnifier, the essence of the invention, was what he called a 'lens,' but which in reality comprised only a circular transparent mass...made of bottle-green glass...one of the Government inspectors reported cynically that its only merit was that it made 'a bad light worse.' "



Congress hired Lewis to fit the 49 lighthouses then in service with his new apparatus. The War of 1812 slowed down his work considerably, but by the end of 1815 he had completed the task.

One of the first lights to be refitted with the Lewis apparatus was Gay Head. The old spider lamps were discarded and a revolving light source consisting of 10 of the new Lewis lamps with 14-inch

reflectors was installed. It is not known whether the "bottle glass" lenses were used at Gay Head. In any case, within a few years all the lenses that had been installed were removed when it was apparent they were reducing rather than increasing the light output.

Keeper Skiff was not enamored of the new lighting system and he wrote to the government requesting another increase in pay because the new lights were so much more difficult to tend:

"...tending the former light might be deemed a simple business if compared with the tendance of the present complicated works and machinery...Almost any man or lad under my wife's care could light the former lamp and do the buisness in a short time, but the case is not so now..."

In the letter to Samuel Smith, Commissioner of Revenue, Skiff described his workload this way:

"The lately constructed light with a stone revolves by a clock which is to be stopped every time anything is done to the fire, which in cold weather must be kindled [when] the sun [is] an hour high, or sooner, and recruited until eleven o'clock or after, when I have to trim the lamps and wind up the weights of the clock and can go into bed at nearly midnight until which a fire is kept in the dwelling-hour consuming more wood than when I tended the former light.

The business respecting the light is, mostly, done by me in person, yet I occasionally leave home to procure wood and many other necessities; previous to which I have to agree with and instruct some trusty white person to tend the light in my absence. If my salary would admit I would hire some people to live constantly with me lest I should be sick—I have no neighbors here but Indians or people of colour.

When I hire an Indian to work I usually give him a dollar per day when the days are long and seventy-five cents a day when the days are short and give him three meals. Now supposing the meals worth 25 cents each, they amount to 75 cents, which is seven cents more than the wages for my service both a day and night (while I board myself) only 68 cents, computing my Salary (as it now is) at 250 Dollars a year and the year to consist of 365 days...

I humbly pray you to take this Matter into your wise Consideration and afford me

relief by granting an increase to my Salary."

Again his "humble" pleading worked and this time it was President Madison who authorized an increase of \$50, making his salary \$300 a year.

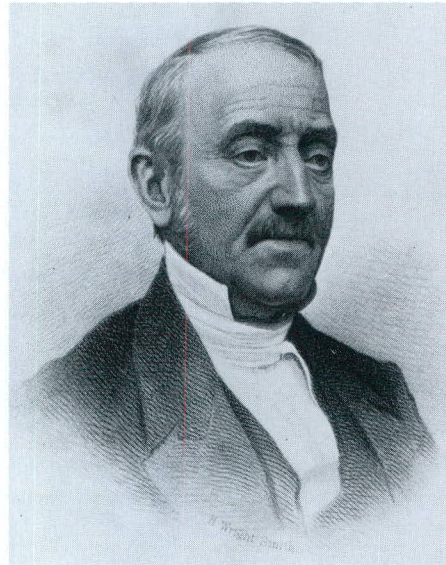
By this time, 1815, there were two other lighthouses in the area: Cape Poge (1802) and Tarpaulin Cove (1807). These, too, were refitted with the Lewis system, but not the complex revolving machinery that Skiff complained about. Beng fixed lights they simply had the new lamps and reflectors installed without the clockwork mechanism.

With Congress appropriating money for new lighthouses at each session, the number along the seacoast had increased to 70 by 1820 and President Monroe decided it was time to assign the responsibility to one office. The Fifth Auditor of the Department of the Treasury was named as administrator of the system. He was Stephen Pleasonton, a man who knew nothing about lighthouses or shipping, he was an auditor. He turned to Captain Lewis for advice and a close relationship was formed which continued for thirty years. Lewis was given regular contracts to service the nation's lighthouses, to inspect them each year and to recommend changes. As a result, some historians say, any improvement in the Lighthouse Establishment was held back by Pleasonton's reliance on Lewis, who continued to insist that his lamps were equal to any in the world.

In increasing numbers, however, mariners who sailed to Europe came back with unfavorable comparisons between our lights and those overseas. By the 1830's, Blunt's *Coast Pilot*, a publication which listed navigation aids for mariners, began a campaign to change over to the European system, using the Fresnel lens and a single lamp, rather than the multi-lamp reflector system of Lewis.

Keeper Skiff on Gay Head was, doubtless, unaware of this struggle. He was still trying to solve his personal problems by writing to Washington. He told Pleasonton that he needed a pair of wheels and some large casks so that he could cart the water to his dwelling from the spring some distance away. His re-

quest was granted, provided it cost no more than \$50. Two years later, in 1823, Skiff again wrote to Pleasonton to ask that a room be added to the house because he had no room "suitable for a chamber in case of sickness." By this time, Skiff was in his 70s and apparently beginning to fail physically. Pleasonton approved the request, but not to exceed \$500.



Winslow Lewis

Perhaps Ebenezer had wanted a room, not for sickness, but for his retirement because in January 1828, having celebrated his 78th birthday and completed 29 years of service, he wrote to Pleasonton requesting that his son Ellis be named to replace him as keeper. His letter was passed along to President John Quincy Adams by the Fifth Auditor:

"Enclosed petition of Ebenezer Skiff, keeper of Gay Head Light, and Ellis Skiff, his son, praying that the latter may be appointed Keeper in the place of the former, who is disqualified by age; the appointment of Ellis Skiff is respectfully submitted. S.P. Pleasonton, Fifth Auditor."

President Adams approved and Pleasonton wrote to Russell Freeman, Representative for the Island in Congress, informing him of Ellis' appointment, an indicator of how political such appointments were. Ebenezer lived six years after retirement, dying in 1834 at age 83.

National politics were becoming increasingly tumultuous. After four years with President John Quincy Adams, the Country in 1828 elected Andrew Jackson to the presidency, returning the Democrats to power. In his battle to end the Bank of the United States, Jackson went through five Secretaries of the Treasury in his first five years in office. The Light House Service, still headed by Pleasonton and still part of the Treasury Department, must have received little attention during the massive struggle between populist Jackson and the banking interests. But opposition to Pleasonton continued. The Blunts wrote to the third of the Jackson Secretaries, W. J. Duane, outlining their complaints. Duane wrote back: *"I am inclined to think the light-house system, as it is called, requires a thorough reform, both as to the style of the lighting and the care of the keepers. I...shall feel thankful for any assistance that it may be in your power to give..."*

That was all the blunt Blunts needed. Two days later, they sent him a list of major changes that should be made. They need not have rushed because within a few weeks, when he refused to take Federal funds out of the National Bank as ordered by President Jackson. Duane was fired. The Light House Service continued without change.

So did life at Gay Head, although Ellis was now paid \$350 a year, \$50 more than his father's top. Supervisor of Gay Head and other nearby lighthouse was switched from New Bedford to Edgartown as the prospering whaling industry made it necessary to have a Collector of Customs on the Island. He was John P. Norton and in his quarterly report to Pleasonton in July 1834, he wrote that at the Gay Head tower "the timber...is defective in the upper part near the Lantern; it has settled and become out of level, but will not require a thorough repair at present. The Dwelling house will require about \$10 repairs."

New problems were developing for the keepers and Norton wrote to Pleasonton in 1835 that "there has been more complaints than usual...that their oil is bad. I will enquire if you will authorize me to purchase an Oleometre to try the test of the oil. I am informed by Merchants of

Nantucket that you can readily find if it has been mixed."

There were growing suspicions, when the oil congealed more in the cold weather than it used to, that the contractors were mixing more of the cheaper whale oil in with the sperm oil than the specifications permitted. Pleasonton seemed unconcerned and wrote a note to his secretary on the bottom of Norton's letter: "Tell him to call upon the contractors to supply good oil and take away the bad. S.P." (One keeper, not on the island, had reported that the oil was so bad he had to shovel it out of the vault in cold weather and melt it in the house before he could burn it.)

Jonathan Howland, who hauled the oil to the lighthouses, had a different explanation: Good sperm oil, he told the Light House Board, was getting scarcer, "owing probably to the great length of time that it remains on shipboard after being taken. When it becomes old...its burning qualities are injured and cannot be reclaimed."

Pleasonton sensed that he was losing the battle with the Blunts and that he would have to do something before he, like the Secretaries of the Treasury, felt the Jacksonian ax. On April 23, 1835, he sent out Instructions to the keepers of light-houses within the United States. Unbelievable as it seems, apparently these were the first detailed written instructions the keepers had received. At that, there were only eight directives, most stating such obvious things as "You are to light the lamps every evening at sun-setting and keep them continually burning bright and clear till sun-rising." (As obvious as that seems, it was needed because keepers were often rather imprecise about lighting and extinguishing their lights. Also, unlike their European counterparts, they were not required to sit up all night watching the light. They would trim the wicks at 11 o'clock or so and then go to bed, hoping that the light burned all night. While it might not go out, it usually diminished in brilliance before morning, becoming less visible to mariners miles away.)

Keeper Skiff apparently did not complain, but Keeper Caleb Cushman at Nantucket was incensed at the Pleasonton

directive and he told the Treasury Department why:

"The 3rd article requires the light be visited and wicks to be trimmed every 4 hours from sunset to sun-rise, thereby adding one half in the short nights, and one third in the long nights to this kind of duty...besides constituting the keeper a continual light-watchman..."

He wrote that the 4th article required him to measure the amount of oil consumed each night, but that the government gave him no gauges to do it with and even with gauges it "would add greatly to the most difficult disagreeable part of the duties of a keeper—to say nothing about the inevitable waste" that would result from emptying the lamps every day. (That, of course, was not necessary. He only had to measure the amount of oil he had to add to bring the level up to full mark, but he was given no such instructions.)

"The 5th article," he continued, "deserves a passing remark. I am happy to have it in my power to say with truth that I neither drink spirituous liquor, nor vend it, nor cause nor allow it to be done on the 'premises of the United States,' nor elsewhere, and I am equally sorry that the Department should be under the deplorable

necessity of calling upon, even a light-house keeper, in a solemn Commandment, to practise the most common, easiest, and cheapest of all the social duties, civility, etc., to orderly behaved strangers whose visits are indeed few and far between.

But it was the article requiring a Keeper to get permission before leaving the lighthouse that stirred him up the most:

"This article," he wrote, "chains the Keeper to the threshold of the Light House without he has leave of absence from the Superintendent, with whom it is utterly impossible to communicate without being absent and, in most cases, for twice as long as the leave would be required for, and who pertinaciously refuses to grant any leave whatsoever." (Emphasis Cushman's.)

"The only post office, market, or place of business to which access can be had at all from here is 14 miles distant by land, 5 of which (and to the nearest neighbors) is over worse than Arabian lands, and it is 9 miles by water across a dangerous outer Roadstead or bay and over the well-known and dreaded Nantucket bar; and the only facility for transportation furnished by the Government is a no-keeled row boat and



A visit to the lighthouse—circa 1880.
Photo courtesy of the Dukes County Historical Society.

nobody to row it, except the Keeper, who must in all cases wait for the 'wind and weather to permit' before he can go to the post office or any where else by water, or return after he has so gone."

Mr. Norton in Edgartown, although well aware of the problem of the isolated keeper, sent Cushman's letter to Washington with only this comment: "I have heard of no complaints from any other light keeper on the subject of your circular he alluded to."

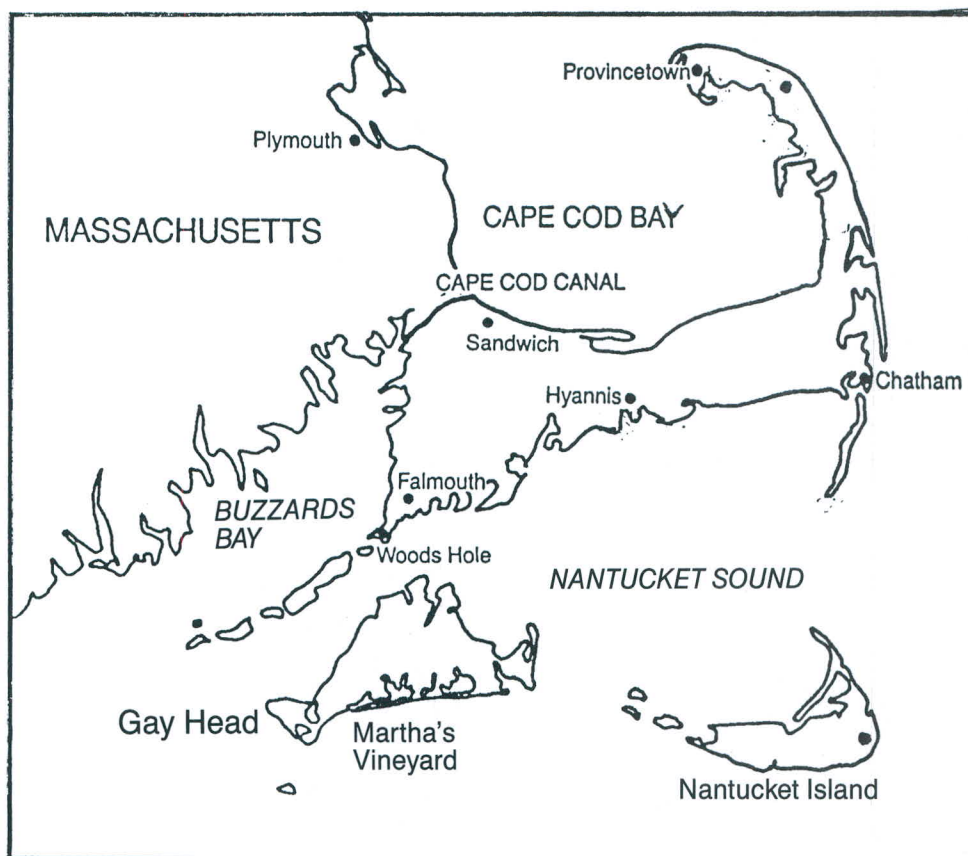
There is no record of anything resulting from the protest. But it made no difference. The directives were not enforced because they were unenforceable—after all, who knew what was happening at a lighthouse which was "inspected" only once a year?

The keeper's complaint was justified. He and the others were provided almost no equipment, except the lighthouse itself. At Gay Head, Skiff, in August 1836, wrote that his boat needed replacing. Norton went up there to see for himself and approved an expenditures of \$70 for a new one. Pleasonton apparently objected because in October Norton wrote to him defending his decision stating that he had found "the boat unfit to repair and unfit to use."

With Levi Woodbury, the fifth Secretary of the Treasury under Jackson, a Navy man, the Blunts continued their attack on Pleasonton. Others joined in, including Joseph Grinnell of New Bedford, former Representative in Congress. He had taken a trip to Europe and brought back data about the lighthouses there which he tried to interest Pleasonton in, but "the officers of Government appeared to have other occupation than listening to improvements of this character," he wrote.

Such criticism must have had its effect on Pleasonton. In any case, more attention was being paid to the light at Gay Head. Inspection visits became more frequent.

Peter Daggett, keeper of the Nobska (Nobska) Point Light, was sent there by Norton to inspect it and report back what he found. On July 2, 1837, he wrote that he had been to Gay Head and "carefully examined the Light House and find the tower, which was built in 1799,



the upper part very rotten and the lantern and outside railing and standards and conductors in very decade (sic) state. So much rusted off in several places that it is very dangerous in anything of a blow to go up in the lantern to light the light and it is my opinion as well as a Master Blacksmith which I took with me that it absolutely necessary to have a new lantern and outside frame and conductors and for the tower to be taken down about two feet to the sound wood and built up a new."

It was a full year later before Norton reported the problem to Pleasonton. In his regular report on July 3, 1838, he wrote: "Light House...sound, with the exception of the deck. This must be made over immediately...The Iron railing that supports the dome has nearly rusted off a number of places, consequently new must be substituted, and I am very suspicious that the iron work of the dome is so corroded that a new one will have to be provided...These repairs will cause the light to be extinguished."

Pleasonton moved fast and on August 1, Norton signed a contract with Lemuel Gammon, blacksmith of New Bedford, for a lantern of the same height and cir-

cumference as the old one. It must have been completed and installed quickly because on October 3, 1838, Lt. Josiah Sturgis, Revenue Cutter Hamilton, wrote to Norton:

"On our recent cruise we visited Gay Head and I was pleased to see there was a new top lantern and frame...As far as I am capable of judging, I should say the work is well done. Gay Head Light is considered a very important light by Mariners. I perceive the Bank near the light house is settling away and I suppose in a few years the light will have to be removed."

Pleasonton, in character, complained about the cost of their repairs. Norton explained that the lantern had had to be completely replaced.

"I sent a Smith from Falmouth to place a new Iron railing and braces that support the lantern outside...he informed me that nothing could be done...the Langern had completely rusted out by age. As this is one of the most important light houses in the United States, I lost no time in having a new one made in New Bedford."

Norton, who wrote the above a week after Lt. Sturgis's letter, had the authority of the Revenue Service to back his state-

ment about the importance of Gay Head.

In 1837, with criticism mounting from Congress, which had created a board of Naval Officers to report on the Service, Pleasonton began work on his organization. He offered to import, and test the Fresnel lens system and he divided the sea coast into Light House Districts, with regular reports being made to the temporary Light House Board that Congress had created. One such report, made in November 1838, provides the first complete statement on the light at Gay Head. It was written by Lt. Edward W. Carpenter:

"Gay Head: Revolving—160 feet above sea level—four minute revolution, seen upwards of 20 miles. Lantern is seven feet high, seven feet wide, larger than is necessary and his inferior glass in it. The tower, which is of wood, has lately undergone extensive repairs, during which the light was suspended...The interest of commerce would justify the erection of a temporary building in such cases...Premises in good order...All draught comes through the scuttle which leads into the lantern and the Keeper, instead of passing through a door in the lantern to the gallery, ascends thereto through a separate scuttle in the top of the tower, exterior to the lantern."

The lamps, he stated, were the same as those at Race Point, Provincetown, so there was no need for him to describe them (they had been described earlier). That light had a revolving fixture containing 10 lamps on its two faces, five on each side. The lamps at Race Point had 13-inch reflectors (at Gay Head they were 14 inches). These were reflectors produced by Winslow Lewis and were among those criticized as being no more parabolic than "a barber's basin."

That, as far as we know, is the first published report on the lighthouse at Gay Head—it was in 1838, nearly forty years after it was built.

Ever since 1799, the light had been kept by the Skiff family, father and son. Nearly 40 years had passed but one complaint was unchanged: Keeper Skiff was still having trouble with the water. The cistern in which he caught rain water was leaking so he asked Norton for a new one. Careful, as always, about money, he

asked for a wooden cistern that would cost \$50. Norton recommended brick or stone, "either of the two latter will be the cheapest in the end...stone can be obtained locally. My estimate...about \$200," he wrote to Pleasonton.

The stone cistern was built, but in January 1840 when explaining to Pleasonton why he had not yet paid the bill, Norton wrote that it had been built "not in a manner to induce me to pay—it leaks some."

But the cistern only provided part of the water supply, drinking water had to come in by cart. As Norton explained to Pleasonton in March 1840: "the cistern water is not fit for culinary purposes, owing to the red Ochre blowing on the roof of the house which cause the water to be red and thick, although very useful for other purposes." What other purposes the "red and thick" water was good for, Norton did not state.

Water, always a problem, was the cause of another difficulty, as Skiff wrote to Norton in 1840:

"I think it necessary that the Government provide a Road from this establishment to

the spring where my predecessor and myself have obtained our supply of water for about thirty years for the following reasons:

"The distance is about half a mile across fields belonging to the Indians and people of Colour, one of which has fenced in the spring and has commenced ploughing the land all round the spring...another has dug a cellar and is about building a dwelling house in the road that I have cleared out and used for several years...The spring was fitted with a stone reservoir so that the water is led into the cask while they are on the truck. The reservoir was made by my predecessor and a Coloured man who is dead...I have no doubt but the Indians are still willing that I should obtain my water as usual if it could be done without injuring them. I feel quite reluctant in making any more requests respecting water, but under the existing circumstances I deem it my duty...ples make this communication known to the Hon. Stephen Plesonton, Esq."

Norton forwarded it to Washington immediately, stating that he felt the keeper had the legal right to the road, but that the deed from Massachusetts did



The Gay Head Lighthouse in 1953. Photo by Frank Small, courtesy of the Dukes County Historical Society. The wooden house was constructed in 1902 replacing the dank brick structure. Dukes County Historical Society photo.

not so state. Therefore, he wrote, because of "the glorious uncertainty of the Law, especially with the Indians, I give it as my opinion that we had better buy a way if can be done at a reasonable price, say \$40 dollars. They say that is all they want, what should be thought reasonable."

Thus the matter seems to have been resolved.

The Blunts and others who were urging the Congress to switch over to the Fresnel single-lamp system were claiming that the present system was burning too much oil. (Because it used many small lamps instead of large one, the Lewis system did use more oil, although it used less than the old spider lamps.) Pleasonton was anxious to hold down oil consumption to overcome this criticism. In 1841, he sent out a circular telling Collectors that he suspected the keepers were using some of the oil for their own purposes and that they must stop this practice.

Collector Norton in Edgartown was upset by such a charge and for the first time he took a stand against his supervisor: "I do extremely regret that you

should think of supposing that any portion of this [oil] was designed for the private use of the light-house keepers when it was only intended to be used in the Lanterns. I do not think they have used it for their private purposes as the quantity they have is small and for all they have had vouchers have been rendered."

Norton called Pleasonton's attention to the oil problem in another letter two months later: "Please note that the yearly report states that the winter oil is not so good as it ought to be."

It was this same year, 1841, that the first two Fresnel lenses in Pleasonton's test program came to the United States: one a 1st order fixed light, the other a 2nd order revolving light. Congress had them installed in the twin lighthouses at Navesink, outside New York. The lights proved to be so superior that in 1842 Congress named a civil engineer, Isaiah William Penn Lewis, as its agent to visit all lighthouses in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts and report on their condition. Lewis was the nephew of Winslow Lewis, but certainly not his supporter.

Lewis completed his inspections and reported to Congress in 1843. As for Gay Head, he wrote that the light was very deficient in power and that "at the distance of 12 miles it is obscured about three-quarters of the time." He recommended that the existing light (installed by his uncle in about 1813) be scrapped and one of the First Order be installed.

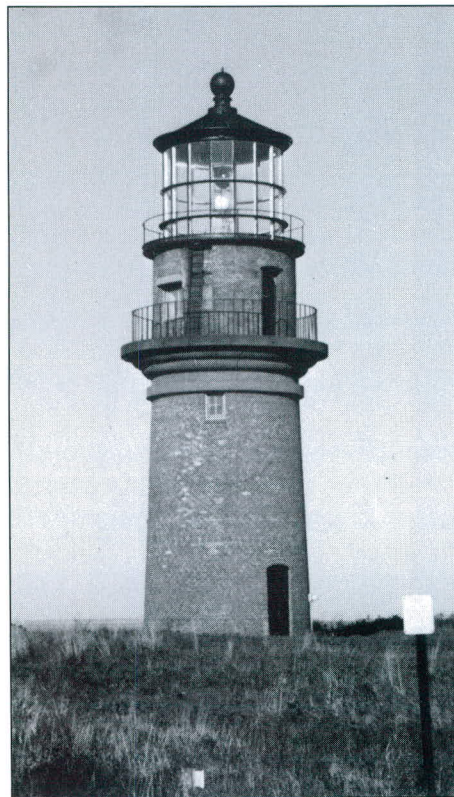
Convinced by the Lewis Report that something must be done, the Congress appointed a Board of Army and Navy officers plus one civilian to make recommendations. The board produced a 760-page report that was an indictment of the 30 years of the Pleasonton-Lewis control of the nation's lighthouses. Published in 1852, it led to the replacement of Pleasonton by an official Light House Board and very quickly to the adoption of the Fresnel system of illumination in most major lighthouses.

Winslow Lewis, whose lamps, reflectors and lenses were pulled out and discarded, was spared any humiliation by fate. He died two years before the report came out. Stephen Pleasonton, who had

developed a passable system of light-houses but as an auditor and not an engineer, lived to see his life's work discredited—perhaps more than justified by the facts.

In listing the most important seacoast lights in the United States, the Report ranked Gay Head 9th, the highest rank of any light north of New York. It stated that "this light is not second to any on the eastern coast, and should be fitted, without delay, with a first order illuminating apparatus. A glance at a chart will suffice, to see its great importance."

Thus, Gay Head took its place among the top navigational aids in America and the wheels of government began turning, shortly to bring to the Island the First Order Fresnel lens.



The Gay Head Lighthouse in 1985. The lens was removed and donated to the Dukes County Historical Society in 1952, the house was razed in 1956 as it was threatened by cliff erosion. Photo by Keeper Bruce Henderson.

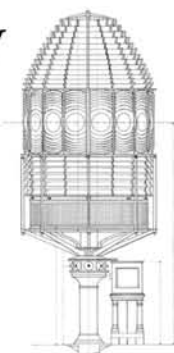
This article reprinted from the *Dukes County Intelligencer* with kind permission of the Dukes County Historical Society. The Author, Arthur R. Railton, is editor of the *Intelligencer* and a lighthouse historian.



Charles W. Vanderhoop, born at Gay Head in 1882, was a member of the Wampanoag tribe and, from 1920 to 1933, keeper of the lighthouse. Photo courtesy of the Dukes County Historical Society.



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.

*To learn more visit
www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255*

Help Support Our Important Mission!

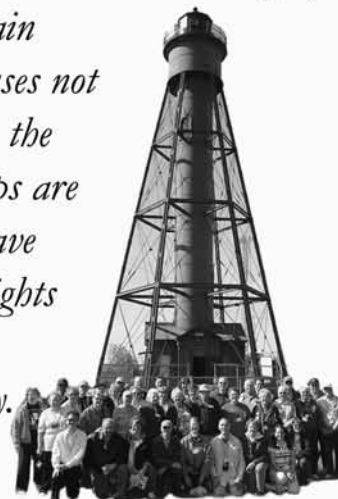
Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984.

Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.

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.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ