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Spectres on the Spiral Stairs

by Elinor DeWire

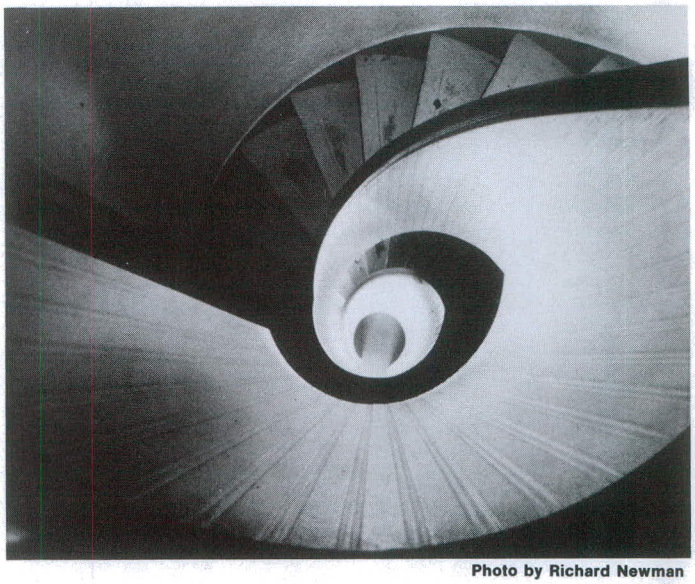


Photo by Richard Newman

Few places on earth boast an atmosphere so completely supernatural as a lighthouse. Its tempest-worn walls reek of salt and shipwreck, and the echo of its spiral stairway seems to reach into infinity. Even the countless grains of sand that surround it, with their constant, insatiable shifting, are subtle reminders of a restless world—a world of spectral beings.

Nearly every lighthouse has, at some time or another, had a ghost residing within its conical confines. These haunting personalities, like the sea itself, are fickle. Some rest peaceful and serene. Others rage and torment their lonely keepers.

Famed Tillamook Rock Lighthouse, off the Oregon coast, had a husky, unidentified voice in its stairwell. Yaquina Head Lighthouse, some fifty miles south of Tillamook, looks so sinister on certain nights local residents believe they see ghosts riding in on the fog.

Cape Sarichef Lighthouse, on Alaska's Unimak Island, is reasoned to have driven keepers mad because of its severe isolation and frequent foul weather. One lightkeeper was removed from the station some years ago cowering and paranoid. As he left the lighthouse, he murmured something about the ghosts that had been tormenting him—spirits of Aleut villagers brutally murdered by Russian otter hunters.

Wave-swept Minots Ledge Lighthouse, off Cohasset, Massachusetts, has seen its keepers come and go as well. While only a mile from shore, the dark tower is perched on a jagged ledge exposed only at high tide. Today, only spiders and seabirds shudder when the lighthouse's spirits grow restless, but during its manned years, keepers came off the ledge with odd complaints.

One man claimed the round Minot tower drove him crazy with its lack of corners, and another keeper slit his throat before a cause for his difficulty could be determined. Other men remained on duty, but spoke of the lens and lamp being mysteriously cleaned, of strange tapping noises in the tower, and a near-drowned, spectral figure clinging to a ladder at the base of the lighthouse.

These eerie occurrences were attributed to the keepers of the original Minots Ledge Lighthouse—a cast iron, pile-design tower that resembled a giant tarantula standing in the sea. The men often signaled to each other by tapping on a pipe that ran from their quarters to the lantern room. They tended the unique tower—America's first wave-swept lighthouse—meticulously, but only a year after it was lighted, a spring gale washed it into the sea. The keepers drowned, but many believe they have returned to haunt the new tower.

Near the picturesque, whitewashed Ocracoke Lighthouse, on North Carolina's Outer Banks, a pirate ghost haunts the area known as Teach's Cove. Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, chose Ocracoke for his haven because its entry was seldom braved by anyone other than a madman like himself. The perils of North Carolina's coast were well known to mariners in Blackbeard's time, but an English naval lieutenant named Maynard succeeded in navigating the shifting bars and caught the pirate and his crew by surprise.

The ensuing battle was bloody, with more than fifty men killed. Maynard engaged Teach in a duel of swords, stabbed him to death, then decapitated the pirate and hung his head from the bowsprit. Legend holds that Blackbeard's headless body swam around Maynard's sloop three times before sinking, while his grotesque head screamed obscenities.

Since that day, Blackbeard's headless spectre has reportedly risen from Teach's Cove to search for its missing head. It swims circles in the water, then stomps ashore carrying an iridescent lantern. Even today, any light other than Ocracoke Lighthouse's benevolent beacon is referred to as Teach's Light, and residents still report Blackbeard's headless spirit ranting about the island.

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The 104 foot high St. Simons Island lighthouse tower was constructed in 1872.
(Museum of Coastal History photograph.)

Lighthouse ghosts have been known to polish up the lantern brass or clank about on catwalks, disturbing lighthouse families, but at St. Simons Lighthouse, in Brunswick, Georgia, it was the family pet the resident ghost harassed. The canine's name was Jinx, and he belonged to the Svendsen family who came to tend the light around 1900.

Soon after settling into their comfortable keepers quarters, Mrs. Svendsen established a routine of putting supper on the table each evening when she heard her husband coming down the tower from lighting the lamp. One evening, she heard his boots tramping down the stairs as usual and began spreading the table. Jinx lay in his favorite spot at the base of the stairway listening to the footsteps.

They grew louder and louder as they neared the bottom of the tower, and Jinx lifted his nose to test the air for the scent of the keeper. It wasn't there. The keeper's wife turned to greet her husband, but he did not appear. Jinx rose to his feet slowly and bristled. His eyes followed an imperceptible form, and he snarled angrily and backed into a corner of the kitchen.

Alarmed by Jinx's behavior, Mrs. Svendsen went to the stairs and carefully climbed to the lantern. There she found the keeper still at work and no trace of the unidentified footsteps. She told her husband about the eerie incident and Jinx's reaction. A few days later, he too heard the lighthouse ghost.

The Svendsens grew accustomed to the spectre's frequent footfall on St. Simons stairs and served thirty-one contented years at the lighthouse. Jinx, on the other hand, never accepted the ghost and would express his dislike for it whenever the apparition clattered about the lighthouse.

A similar uninvited guest appeared some years ago at lonely Destruction Island Lighthouse off the coast of Washington. This isolated chunk of land was once a sacred Indian burial ground. The ghost of the lighthouse may have been a spirit whose resting place was violated. Some believe the spectre was the lost soul of a fisherman who washed ashore three years ago. His body was never identified, and keepers buried him beneath a rock on the island.

There is no solid explanation for Destruction Island's ghost, or why it appeared just once, but it gave the keeper, his wife, and their cat a chill they never forgot. It was cold, pitch-dark, and windy that night—the perfect setting for a ghost-lark. The cat lay asleep on the floor while the keeper and his wife sat reading.

Without apparent provocation, the cat suddenly sprang to its feet, arched its back, and hissed madly. Something clamored in the attic, then slowly proceeded down the stairs. The keeper and his wife watched the cat back away defensively as the rhythmic footsteps met the landing and crossed the room.

An unseen presence opened the door and exited into the howling night, closing the door behind itself. Only a low moan of wind remained, and the cat returned to its nap on the floor. The footfall was never heard again, and the keeper and his wife decided they had witnessed a satisfied spirit returning to the world of the dead.

In the 1920s at lonely Hendricks Head Lighthouse, near Boothbay, Maine, the keeper passed a well-dressed lady walking on the road to the lighthouse. It was almost dark, and the keeper was puzzled as to why such a dignified woman should be walking alone at such a late hour. She passed without speaking, and when the keeper returned from his errand, she was nowhere to be seen.

The following day, her dead body washed ashore on the beach near the lighthouse. Weighted down with a flatiron, it appeared as if she had committed suicide or been murdered. Her nameless body was interred in a nearby cemetary, and shortly thereafter, reports began to circulate of a comely lady walking the lonely stretch of road to the lighthouse. Her ghost was also seen trodding trackless along the beach and hovering above the sea just off Hendricks Head.

Boston Lighthouse harbors the ghost of the "Lady in Black," the wife of a Confederate officer imprisoned at a nearby fort during the Civil War. The lady drowned while attempting to rescue her husband in a small boat. Her unquenched spirit has been seen flitting about in the shadow of Boston Light, dancing on the water in its beam, and walking the spit off Little Brewster Island at low tide.

California's Crescent City Lighthouse was supposedly visited for a time by miniature mermaids. The keeper was said to have lured one of the tiny creatures into the lighthouse with offerings of food. Less unlikely are the reports of footsteps in Crescent City lighthouse. At least six people have heard the harmless phantom. It scales the tower on

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The old Humboldt Harbor Lighthouse constructed in 1856 and retired in 1892. The structure was razed in the 1930's but some local residents insist spectres still roam the area where the lighthouse stood.

stormy nights, when the need for a lighthouse is paramount, and sounds as if it wears heavy boots.

The nearby site of old Humboldt Harbour Lighthouse is also said to be haunted. The lighthouse was built in 1856, but knew a short career, having given its responsibilities and lens to Table Bluff Light Station in 1892. After it was extinguished, many residents insisted the old lighthouse still cast an eerie glow from its deactivated lantern. The tower collapsed in 1933, but a few reports still linger of a ghostly iridescence from this section of the North Spit.

Spectres of a different nature haunt the premises of Execution Rocks Lighthouse, near New Rochelle, New York. There is little at the rock today to remind anyone of its ghastly past, but the ghosts of an emerging nation are still there.

Prior to the Revolution, and before a lighthouse stood on the site, insurrectionists were cruelly put to death in a pit at the rock. Prisoners who might have shouted embarrassing remarks against the King at a public execution, were brought to Execution Rocks and chained to the walls of a large pit. When the tide rose sufficiently the pit flooded and its occupants died a grueling death.

Some say the ghosts of the executed found their revenge when the Revolution came. As George Washington and his exhausted men fled Manhattan, with a shipload of British in hot pursuit, a strange fate befell the King's men. Their ship veered toward Execution Rocks, as if pulled by unseen spirits, and crashed on its jagged ledge. All aboard drowned, and Washington made it safely to White Plains.

The pit was filled with riprap when Execution Rocks Lighthouse was built in 1849. Due to the rock's grisly past, the government stipulated that lighthouse duty would be voluntary. The memory of death could never be completely washed from these rocks, but no one would ever again feel chained to them.

There have been many unexplainable spirits associated with old sentinels, but two lighthouse ghosts have been positively identified. One persistently patrols her territory in a flowing, white gown and haunts the well-groomed grounds of Point Vicente Lighthouse on the Palos Verde Estates of California.

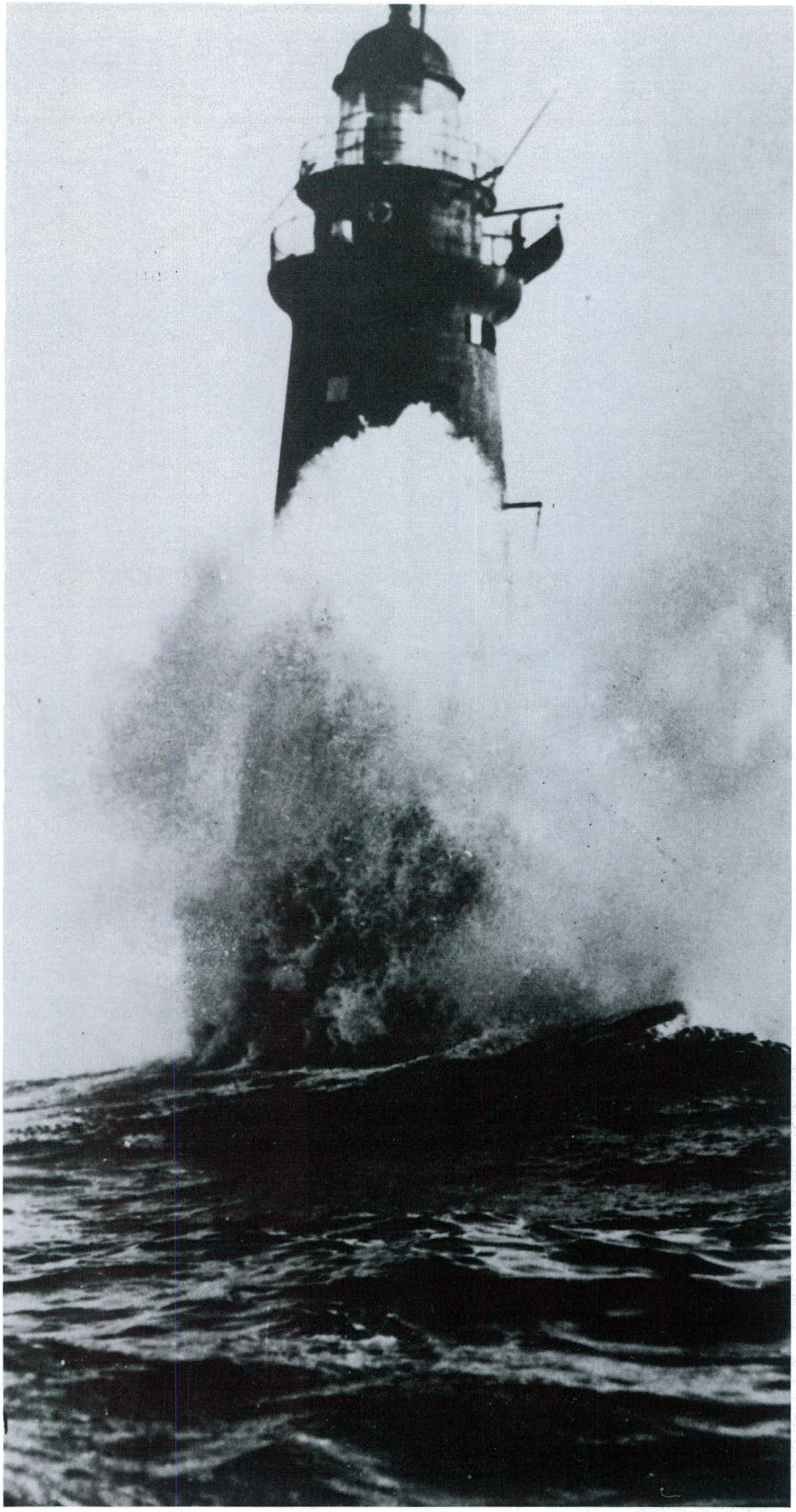
The earliest keepers of Point Vicente Lighthouse believed the female apparition to be the deceased wife of a sailor lost in a shipwreck at the point prior to the lighthouse's erection in 1926. Her nocturnal walks around the tower lacked the usual frightening shrieks and eerie moans associated with most ghosts. She was a serene and beautiful spirit, waltzing about like a ballerina in a music box, and keepers admitted a measure of affection for her ethereal form.

One young keeper, just eight months into his tour with the Coast Guard at Point Vicente, could not accept the old-fashioned idea of a haunted lighthouse. He determined to find a reasonable cause for this supernatural occurrence. The spectre's visits seemed far too consistent in time and place to be of unearthly origin, and after studying the female intruder night after night, the young man came up with a sensible explanation for her existence.

He discovered the beautiful ghost was a product of the lighthouse's powerful, revolving Fresnel lens. The illusion was created by light being reflected outward from the curved lens in the shape of a reversed parenthesis. As the light rotated past each stanchion of the lantern, the apparition appeared to move with delicate, feminine steps. At a prescribed distance from the source, the reflection resembled a glowing hourglass—certainly a shape any lonely keeper might ascribe to a woman.

The restless spirit of Carysfort Reef Lighthouse, a screwpile tower off the Florida Keys, is Captain Johnson—a crotchety, old, whisker-faced keeper who died at the lighthouse soon after it was built. The keepers who succeeded Johnson heard loud screeches and groans in the tower on hot summer nights, and they attributed these sounds to the unhappy spirit of the captain.

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Dangerous and mysterious Minots Ledge Lighthouse was constructed in 1860, nine years after the first lighthouse was destroyed in a storm. The two keepers on duty lost their lives...some say they haunt the new structure. **(U.S. Coast Guard photo.)**

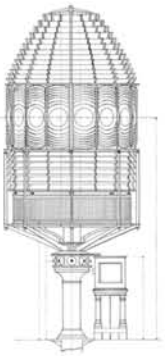
Not until 1927 did anyone attempt to find a logical explanation for the noises. Charles Brookfield, on a fishing trip in the keys, was invited aboard the lighthouse one night. The tower's shuddering so unnerved Brookfield, he determined to find the real cause or not sleep. After examining the lighthouse's enormous piles and braces, Brookfield concluded that these metal parts expanded under the hot sun during the day, then rapidly contracted as the temperature dropped each night. The sounds made as the piles contract are remarkably human—perhaps like those of an aching spirit.

There are few keepers left these days to record the haunting accounts of lighthouses—the unexplained noises, the mysteriously cleaned lens and lamp, the shadowy figures darting about in the dark recesses of stairways. Ghosts are finding it much more difficult to keep up appearances these days with only the machinery of automation to torment. Still, occasional supernatural encounters occur.

A low moan sometimes creeps in through the crevices at Execution Rocks Lighthouse when Coast Guardsmen are tending its beacon. The men who check Minots Ledge Light don't waste any time in its damp, cobweb-laced stairwell, and no one is eager to investigate any strange lights that appear near Ocracoke Lighthouse. Even at St. Simons Lighthouse, now a museum, visitors occasionally think they hear footsteps behind them as they scale the slender, white tower.

Is it just an echo, or could there be a spectre on the spiral stairs?

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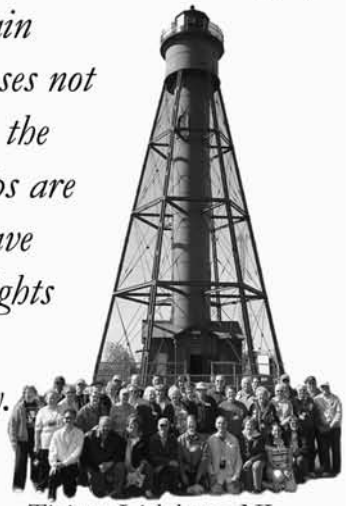
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