

LOG

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- Isle of Shoals Light Station
- Cape Sable Light Station, Nova Scotia
- Only Yesterday—Cuttyhunk Lighthouse
- From Braziers & Bougies to Xenon—Part I

Isle of Shoals

By Wayne Wheeler



Isle of Shoals lighthouse as depicted in a 19th century issue of *Harper's Magazine*.

Iisle of Shoals is a cluster of eight islets anchored six miles off the east coast straddling the New Hampshire-Maine border. Five of them: Duck, Appledore, Malaga, Haley's (originally called Smuttynose) and Cedar, belong to Maine. The rest: Star, White, and Londoner, belong to New Hampshire. Appledore (once called Hog Island) is by far the largest and White is the only one of the cluster with a lighthouse. Over the years it has been called the Isle of Shoals Lighthouse as well as the White Island Lighthouse.

The Isle of Shoals has a varied and interesting history, at times it has been almost a nation unto itself. It was first named Smith's Isles

by English Admiral John Smith in 1614. However, the name didn't stick and they soon became known as Shoal of Isles by local fishermen as they resembled a shoal (school) of fish, swimming close together. Others maintain that the name is derived from the fact that there are shoals in the area. In any event, Shoal of Isles eventually became called Isle of Shoals.

House of Representatives Document 23, of 1853, notes, in part,

Dreary and inhospitable in their appearance, they would have remained without inhabitants to our day, probably, but for their advantageous situation for carrying on the fisheries ... In places, acres of rock are partially or entirely severed, and through the fissures thus formed, the sea at high tides, and

in some storms, rushes in torrents. There is but one secure harbor, which is of great importance, sheltering not only the vessels of the resident fishermen of the islands, but the merchant vessels coming upon the coast in distress.

In 1661, they [the islands] were inhabited by upwards of forty families. The fisheries were prosecuted with vigor and success at that period, and subsequently, for quite a century. Three of four ships were loaded there annually, as soon as the year 1730 for Bilboa, in Spain: and large quantities of fish were carried, besides to Portsmouth, NH, to be shipped to the West Indies. Prior to the Revolution, the dun-fish [flying fish] of these islands had obtained universal celebrity, and were considered to be the best table fish in the world.

In 1641, the Anglican clergyman, Richard Gibson performed marriages and other religious rites on one of the islands against the wishes of Boston Puritans who dispatched a vessel to bring him to Boston where he was imprisoned for a year.

During one period women were forbidden to live on the islands. In 1647, fisherman John Reynolds brought his wife out to Appledore. Two other fishermen petitioned the court, "... that John Reynolds, contrary to an Act in Court [which says] that noe wimmin shall live upon the Ille of Showles, hath brought his wife thether. Our petitioners thearfore prayeth that the act of Cort ... may be put in execution to the removall of all wimmin from inhabiting ther." The complaint also addressed the fact that there was a herd of goats and numerous swine on the island that were affecting the drinking water. The court sided with the Reynolds, his wife could stay, but the goats and pigs had to go.

In 1702, the Captain of a French ship

visiting the islands noted that there were 280 men, plus women and children on the islands.

The Isle of Shoals was inhospitable to women. During the Indian wars in 1676 Indians killed a woman and her two children. In 1873, Lewis Wagner, of Portsmouth, NH, rowed out to Appledore with the intent to rob the Swedish family living on the island. He had heard rumors that the family was wealthy. Stealing into the house he first murdered Marie Christianson as she lay sleeping. Waking to the struggle, Annetta, her sister-in-law, escaped through a window, but as she stood outside in a state of shock, Wagner split her head with one blow of his axe. A third woman fled the house and attracted the attention of a local fisherman who went after the criminal. Wagner escaped to his boat and rowed back to Portsmouth. He was later apprehended, tried and hung.

White Island, at high tide, becomes two islets when the tombolo connecting the two

parts is inundated. The smaller section is called Seavey's Island.

White Island is a grim and barren rock braving occasional beatings by Atlantic storms. The rugged, steep southern face is perpendicular. The lighthouse is located on the highest part of this face, some 80 feet above the water. The violence of the sea, when it lashes against the island, is illustrated by the fact that the heavy, 200-foot-long covered walkway linking the dwelling to the tower was completely washed away at least three times.

AN ACT to authorize the erection of a light-house on one of the Isle of Shoals, near Portsmouth, in New Hampshire, and for other purposes ... That as soon as the jurisdiction of such one of the Isle of Shoals, in the State of New Hampshire, in the State of Massachusetts, or in the State of Maine, as the President of the United States shall select for the site of a light-house, shall he ceded to, and the property thereof vested in, the United States, it shall be the duty of the Secretary of the Treasury to provide, by contract, which shall be approved by the President, for building a light-house on such island, to be so lighted as to be distinguishable from other light-houses on the east and west of the same; and also to agree for the salaries, ages, or hire of the person or persons to be appointed by the President for the superintendence of the same.

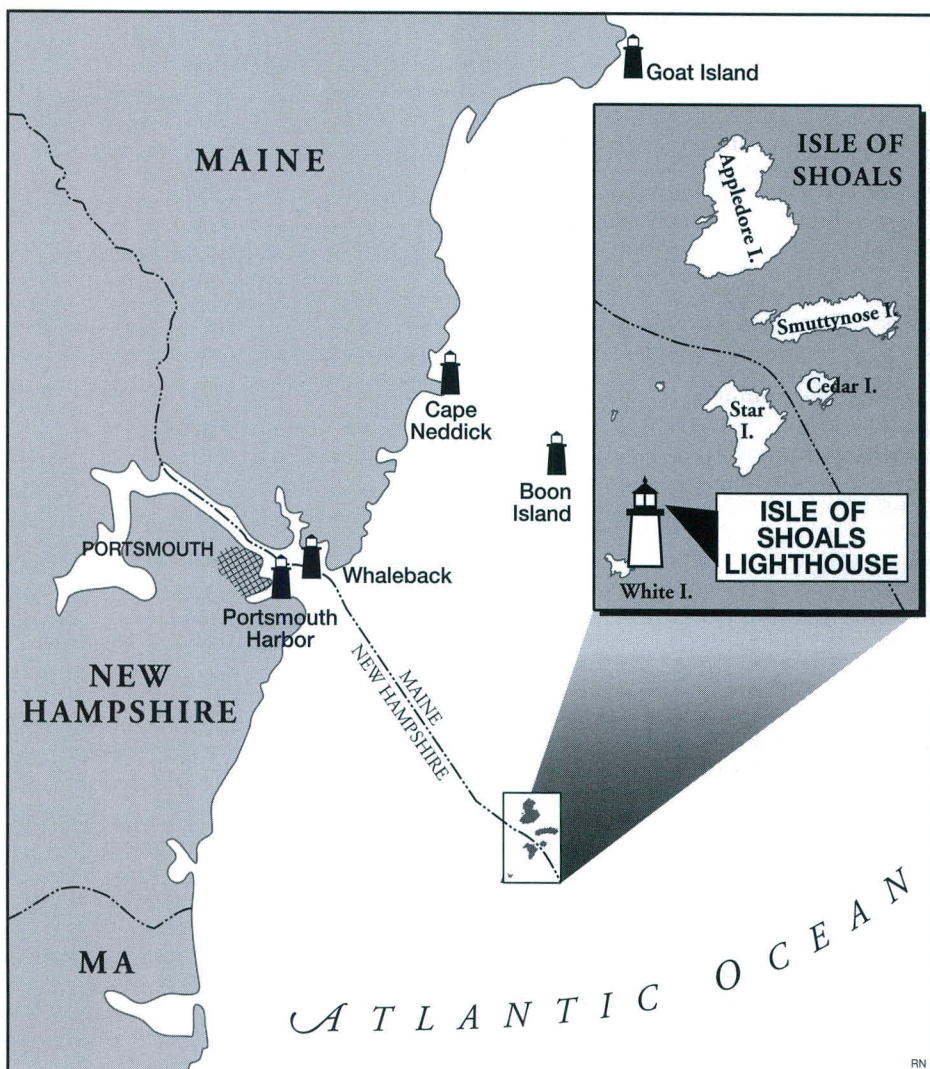
Approved May 15, 1820.

It is interesting to note the passage "... indistinguishable from other light-houses on the east and west ..." This is one of the first documented instruction that ensured lights in proximity varied. The Isle of Shoals lighthouse was equipped with a rotating reflector system of 15 lamps with 21 inch reflectors, displaying an alternating flashing red and white light every 3 minutes, 15 seconds.

Two years later, an Act of May 7, 1822, appropriated \$11,500 for the construction of the light station on White Island.

The original dwelling and light tower were constructed of rubble stone. The tower stood 40 feet high, to the lantern. The lantern was of the old "birdcage" style and was probably 10 feet high to the peak of the copper dome.

One of the more colorful keepers of the light station was Thomas Lughton. In 1839, after losing the race for governor of New Hampshire, he applied and was hired as the keeper of the light station on August 28, 1843 at a salary of \$600 a year. Five years before this





Right – The Isle of Shoals Light Station circa 1850s with the original stone dwelling. Storage building at left and boathouse at right. The structure to the right of the tower contained the fog signal. National Archives photo.



Isle of Shoals Light Station after 1878 with the new dwelling at left. The original stone dwelling in the center has been converted to a storage building. Boathouse at right. National Archives photo.



Isle of Shoals showing the 200-foot-long covered walkway, which still exists, and the fog signal building. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.



A circa 1950s aerial view of some of the Isle of Shoals islands. White Island is in the foreground with its little sister, Seavey Island off to the left (the two are joined at low water). In the distance at right is Star Island, Appledore at left. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

he had purchased four of the islands from Samuel Haley. So he was the keeper of White Island and at the same time owned Appledore, Smuttynose (now called Haley's), Malaga and Cedar Islands. He arrived at his new post with his wife, two daughters and a hired hand. It was his family and hired hand Ben Whaling who did most of the light tending, while Lughton traveled to the mainland to conduct business. He eventually constructed a small hotel on Appledore called the Mid Ocean. He resigned his commission on June 5, 1849 and moved his family into the hotel, a facility that eventually was enlarged to accommodate 500 guests. His daughter Celia (married name Thaxter) became a poet of some renown. Many of her poems were based on recollections of her childhood on White Island. One recounting her job as dad's assistant is printed on the inside back cover of this issue.

In 1837, I. W. P. Lewis inspected the lighthouse on a special mission from the Navy. His closing remarks, "... the whole construction of the apparatus bears the mark of rude workmanship." The constructor, Winslow Lewis, rebutted this report on Isle of Shoal Lighthouse who said, "So far from this being fact, the construction and workmanship of the lantern and lighting apparatus are not surpassed by any in the United States. The lantern, lamps and reflectors were new, put up by me in 1841."

In 1843, the original stone tower was encased in wood and shingled in an effort to protect the masonry. The lantern room glass panes were increased in size and larger, 21-inch-diameter, reflectors were installed. An inspector that year described the station, "Tower of rubble masonry, 40 feet high, laid up with lime mortar, and cased over with wood and shingled outside ... Dwelling-house of rubble masonry ... four small rooms on first floor, two chambers in the attic, boat-house and ways all in decent order ..." The optic consisted of a triangular frame with five lamps and reflectors on each face, one face covered with red glass which produced the white – red – white characteristic. The inspector went on:

The machine of rotation ... consisting of a train of light brass wheel-work, set in motion by the descent of a weight hung with a cord and two pulleys. These machines are too light for the purpose, and are stopped by the slightest obstruction; they require to be carefully covered

from the effects of dust and moisture. White Island is the southwestern most of the Isle of Shoals, which are a dangerous obstacle to the navigation of the coast. The light is highly important as a point of departure for Portsmouth Harbor, or to clear the York Ledges. The present lantern and apparatus were placed in the tower in the summer of 1841, at a cost of \$3,000, being the third lantern and apparatus since the erection of the light. The workmanship does not square with the great cost, and the nicety required to adjust the burners exactly in the focus of their respective reflectors appears to have been totally neglected, no two being exactly in similar positions when occupying reflectors of like force [strength]. There are among the fifteen reflectors four different patterns ... ten reflectors are out of perpendicular, some elevated and some depressed ... the red light should have lamps of greater intensity, or more in number than the white ... consequently the red light cannot be seen more than half the distance of the white, and by a distant observer might be mistaken for the revolving white light at Boston. The whole construction of the apparatus bears the mark of rude workmanship.

This of course, was the work of Winslow Lewis who had the ear and blessing of Stephen Pleasonton, head of America's lighthouses in this era. We have mentioned Lewis and his chicanery on several occasions.

The first keeper, Thomas Lughton, was relieved by L. H. L. Shephard. Shortly after Shephard assumed command his station was inspected by members of the ad hoc Lighthouse Board. In 1851, they wrote,

Sea-coast light: revolving red and white light, one face red tubes ... Shephard, principle and only keeper; took charge July 15 1849; school teacher; had no previous instruction, predecessor gave a few days instruction. Fifteen reflectors on a triangular frame; five on each face, varying from 19 to 21 inches in diameter, nearly all different. Only two parabolic in shape; plating very thin; burners not in adjustment, lamps very bad; lights up generally about sunseting and puts out a little before sunrise. Does not use the ventilators properly (or understand them).

Has the usual printed instructions, and no others. Oil pretty good, most of it. Reports bad supplies. Mr. Holland (contractor furnishing lighthouse supplies) leaves what supplies he pleases of oil, etc. Last year got bad tube glasses from him ... wicks also bad: colored

chimneys of different shapes. Light revolves once in 3 and 1/4 minutes. Part of the oil kept on lower floor of the tower, and the winter oil in the cellar of the dwelling. Cellar of dwelling dirty and filled with barrels, etc. Tower built of rubble masonry covered with boards and shingles. Lantern frame of iron: glass 20 by 18 inches ... towards the harbor of Portsmouth 14 by 18 inches. Keeps a day book or journal, but could not furnish the quantity of oil consumed last year from it. Makes quarterly returns but does not keep copies. Has no time piece. Floors of dwelling painted, and also the steps of the tower, in part - waste of paint.

A new brick tower was constructed in 1855 and a 2nd order Fresnel lens installed. The new optic also produced a flashing red and white characteristic, which was visible for 15 miles.

By 1875 the dwelling had fallen into a state of disrepair. The service requested funds for a dwelling to replace the dank stone structure that had served since 1821. Funds for a new dwelling were requested for two years. The 1876 Report of the Lighthouse Board states, "The old dwelling at this station is so much decayed that it is scarcely habitable. An appropriation of \$6,000 is respectfully submitted to build a new dwelling for the keeper and his assistant." The next year the Board reported, "A new dwelling is in the course of construction." and in 1878, "A one and a half story frame double dwelling was erected, and the old stone building refitted as a storehouse."

Mineral oil replaced lard oil in 1883. Walking around on the rough rocky islet of White Island must have been difficult for the keepers, during rain, sleet and especially during nor'easters. To ease the keepers' job of getting to and from the tower in 1892, the Board mentioned, "Some 130 feet of plank walk were laid from the dwelling to the outbuilding and coverway. A brick oil house was built. A new revolving machine [clock-works] made in the board's shops [General Depot in Staten Island] was set up." As mentioned earlier, the covered walkway was completely blown off the island on at least three occasions.

One of the exciting events that occurred at the Isle of Shoals Light Station was during a March gale. Acting Keeper John Downs was in the tower with a friend who had volunteered to stand the watch with him. The head keeper had gone ashore prior to the

storm to purchase supplies and to bring his wife and family out to the island. However, he was unable to return due to a huge storm.

The storm was punishing and long. For nearly a week the nor'easter pounded the island and station. Finally on the sixth day a driving snow storm was added to the mix and by midnight the furious intensity of the storm, coupled with a high tide, drove waves across the rocky islet. Keeper Downs and his friend barely made it from the tower to the dwelling before large waves cascaded across the island. Shortly after midnight the storm abated somewhat and keeper Downs told his volunteer to get some sleep. But, he continued to make conversation and remarked, "Well, John what would you think if somebody was to knock on the door just now?" "Think," he replied, "I should think it was the devil himself, for no human being could land alive on the island tonight with that storm raging."

As if to respond to his statement, a knock was heard on the door. Both men froze and turned to the door. Then the sound came again – rap, rap, rap – and then a hammering. Frightened, Downs lit a lantern and started for the door. As they knew no other person was on the island they were apprehensive. Pulling open the door and with great difficulty to keep it from slamming into the wall, Downs stared out to see a large black man, filling the doorway. He was bleeding and soaking wet. "Brig ashore, sir!" he cried, "Right near the tower!" John Downs and his friend brought the sailor into the house, dried him off, wrapped him in warm clothes and dressed

his wounds. The sailor related that his ship was a Russian brig bound for Salem, Massachusetts with a cargo of hides and tallow. The captain had thought he was 100 miles from their position. They had come to rest right under the lighthouse tower, not having seen the light in the driving snow storm. The sailor had volunteered to lower himself from the bowsprit and seek help. After letting go of the line that lowered him, he found himself constantly pummeled by the waves breaking against the shore. He clawed his way up the steep embankment, often losing ground when he slipped on the slick rocks. When the waves receded he would struggle upward, then when the waves broke over him again, he would hang onto the rocks, until they receded again. Once up on the high part of the island he saw the light coming from a crack of a dwelling shutter and headed for the house.

The three men started out for the brig. John Downs flung a line out to the vessel that was secured to the bowsprit. Having no place to anchor the line on his end, Downs wrapped it around his waist and told the other two to take hold of the bitter end. He then yelled for the sailors on the brig to come ashore using the line, but only one at a time. The first twelve succeeded in making it to shore, soaked but safe. But, the last two men of the crew were almost swept off the ledge and were badly cut and bruised. Eventually, the entire crew made it ashore and to the dwelling where they were dried and fed. Feeding eventually became a worry for Downs as there was only so much food, and he certainly

hadn't planned for 14 hands to feed. Compounding the situation the storm lasted another week, preventing the head keeper from returning with supplies. The storm subsided after a week. Just as they were about to run out of food and the keeper returned with supplies. Eventually the crew was taken to the mainland.

Over the years John Downs often told the story of the remarkable feat the brig's sailor had performed on that stormy night.

From the beginning, the Isle of Shoals had a bell fog signal. At an exposed location like the Isle of Shoals a bell is not a very effective signal. It has no "staying power" against strong winds. Yet, the service continued to maintain the bell fog signal for many years.

In 1896, a larger bell was installed, but pronounced "inadequate" by the Board. In 1897, it was suggested that the bell be replaced with a more powerful type of signal. The Lighthouse Service debated between installing a horn on Isle of Shoals or Boon Island. Boon Island won out. "The fog signal now on White Island at the Isle of Shoals light is a bell. It falls far short of being adequate to the needs of commerce. A more effective signal is required. It is estimated that this can be established here for \$5,500, and it is recommended that an appropriation of this amount be made therefore." The request was denied, although the Board requested the appropriation in their annual Report for the next four years before giving up.

In 1906, a new bell signal with an automatic striker was installed at the White Island station. Eventually an air siren signal was installed at the station.

Finally, in 1912, Congress did authorize funds to install a 1st class air siren at Isle of Shoals. It provided a 3 second blast every 30 seconds.

The Coast Guard automated the lighthouse and removed personnel in 1986. In 1993 White Island, and four other islands in the cluster, were transferred to the New Hampshire State Parks system.

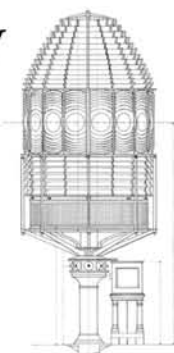
The Isles of Shoals Steamship Company conducts cruises to see area lighthouses, including the Isle of Shoals Light Station. Contact them via their website at www.islesofshoals.com/lighthouse.html or by writing Isles of Shoals Steamship Co., 315 Market Street, P.O. Box 311 Portsmouth, NH 03802-0311 Their phone numbers are: 800-441-4620 or 603-431-5500.



Isle of Shoals Light Station in 1990 showing the Coast Guard-erected dwelling. Photographer unknown.



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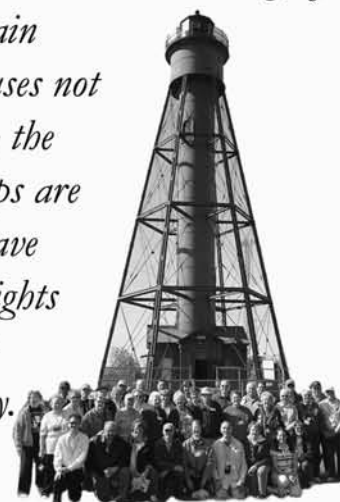
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