

MATINICUS ROCK

By Wayne C. Wheeler



Matinicus Rock Light Station. 1886 drawing.

The year is 1826, the new country is just fifty years old. The nation's coastline bustles with commerce. The young government, responding to the needs of industry, attempts to make the shipping lanes as safe as possible and acquires title to a lonely rock in the Atlantic off Maine's coast.

Matinicus Rock is a barren outcropping off the coast of Maine. It is the southernmost feature of the Matinicus archipelago of five islands (four are partially wooded) and numerous high barren rocks. It is located about 22 miles off the mainland in the track of vessels plying the coastal waters of Maine, halfway between Monhegan Island to the south and Mount Desert Rock to the north.

This barren ledge, which resembles the moon's surface, is raked with high winds, pounded and occasionally inundated by the sea and sometimes shrouded in thick fog.

During gales the rock is swept by the sea. It has been reported that boulders weighing two tons have rolled across the barren outcropping. There is no natural vegetation on the island. During the 19th century keepers annually brought barrels of soil from the mainland during a spring supply run. The dirt was placed in rock crevices around the dwellings and crude gardens were planted. This process had to be repeated yearly as winter storms washed the soil away.

Know all men by these presents, that we, George W. Coffin, Agent for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and James Irish, Agent for the State of Maine, upon the subject of Public Lands in said state by virtue of powers vested in us by resolves of said Commonwealth dated the eleventh day of June eighteen hundred and twenty five, and by resolved of said State, dated the twenty sixth day of February, eighteen hundred and twenty five, and in consideration of the sum of TWENTY DOLLARS to us paid for the use of said Commonwealth and State...Do by these presents...sell, relinquish, and quit-claim all the right, title and interest of the said Commonwealth and State to said United States of America...a certain island or rock, on the coast of Maine, off Penobscot Bay lying southeasterly of Matinicus Island about five miles and Easterly of Monhegan Island about twenty miles, containing by estimation about eight acres more or less and known by the name of Matinicus Rock and sometimes called Wooden Ball Rock [ed. actually Wooden Ball Rock is several miles toward shore from Matinicus] — To Have and To Hold the same with all privileges and appurtenances thereof to the said United States of America [for] use and behoof forever.

Signed Geo. Coffin and James Irish
[recorded] November 2, 1826

CONTRACT FOR BUILDING

A Dwelling House and Two Light-Houses on Matinicus Rock, Maine

"Articles of Agreement made this fifteenth day of February in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty seven. Between Isaac Ilsley, Superintendent of Light-Houses in the State of Maine, on behalf of the United States of America of the first part and Jeremiah Berry, of Thomaston in the State of Maine, Brick-layer of the second part."

The contract goes on to state that Mr. Berry will "...build, finish and complete in a workman-like manner...on or before August, 1827, a dwelling house and two Light-Houses on Matinicus Rock."

The dwelling was constructed of split, undressed stones and measured 40 by 20 feet. The dwelling was designed to endure the pounding that the exposed Matinicus Rock receives from storms. The one-story dwelling had walls two feet thick, rafters eight inches square and beams twelve inches square. The roof was secured to the dwelling with iron bars running four feet down into the walls.

The contract stated, "The house to be divided into two rooms with a chimney in the middle and an entry [hall] six feet wide in front of the chimney - a door to each room and an out door - a fireplace in each room and closets with shelves and doors in back of the chimney. Stairs to lead from the entry to the chambers [bedrooms upstairs], which are to be partitioned off, one door in each, lathed and plastered...double floors well nailed...three windows in one room and two in the other...and one window...in each chamber.

There are to be cellar doors...and stone steps to enter the cellar from the outside, and an entrance to the cellar and stairs from one of the rooms inside. Each end of the cellar to be a small window glazed. Attached to the house to be a porch or kitchen ten by twelve feet in the clear, the walls to be eighteen inches thick, one window...two doors, one to lead to the rooms in the house, the other outside, a chimney with an iron crane...and hooks, on one side of the oven of middling size with an iron door, on the other side a sink with a gutter to lead through the wall out of the house... all doors to be four panels, substantial iron hinges and latches, the outside doors to have strong locks [who would break in on Matinicus Rock?...]...all windows to have suitable shutters, hinges and fastenings. Iron mantle pieces to the fireplaces and oven....all the wood-work inside and out to be painted twice over, including floors, the walls of the house and cellar to be... white-washed twice over."

The house was built to endure storms, but interestingly enough, the towers were constructed of wood.

"In each end of the house to be an Octagon Tower of ten feet in diameter stand on the beams of the house, to ride six feet above the ridge of house and well secured together by girths and braces - the posts to be ten by twelve inches - the girths ten by eight inches..."

"The outside of the towers above the roof to be boarded.. collared with sheet lead and shingled.

"On the top of each tower to be a deck

eleven and a half feet in diameter of three inch planks...on which is to be laid tarred sheathing paper and that covered with copper...on one side of each deck a small scuttle twenty four inches by twenty to enter the lantern - the scuttle doors to be made of double boards and covered with copper, same as the decks. One window in the upper story of each tower of twelve lights [the floor below the lantern]. A sufficient number of steps to lead from the attic chamber of the house to the entrance of the scuttle with a good hand-rail...

"On the top of each tower to be an iron lantern of an octagon form. The height and diameter of the lanterns to be sufficient to admit into each octagon an iron sash with twenty one lights [ed. windows] twelve by eleven to be glazed with glass of double thickness from the Boston Glass Manufactory, the lower tier to be filled with copper."

One panel of each octagon had a two foot by four foot copper door to the outside deck, which was surrounded with a railing. The dome of the lantern room was constructed with sixteen iron hoops covered with copper.

"The wood-work of the towers, the lanterns, ventilators and vanes to be painted twice over — all iron and copper-work black — the putty on the sashes and wood-work white, to have one complete electrical conductor, made from copper three quarters of an inch diameter and painted....the whole to be approved by the said Superintendent or such other person as may be designated by him..."

In the spring of 1827, brick-layer Jeremiah Berry and his crew sailed to this barren inhospitable rock seemingly in the middle of the ocean. We assume the granite for the dwelling was mined from the rock itself, but the wood and all other materials to construct the light towers and portions of the dwelling had to be transported from the mainland or nearby Matinicus Island, some six miles to the north. Because there is no harbor or even a cove at Matinicus Rock, transferring the material from a sailboat to shore must have been as arduous a task as the construction. And, what of shelter? It's hard to imagine tents being erected on the landscape of lumpy granite boulders. Living conditions for the crew must have been rigorous.

The work was completed and found acceptable on July 20, 1827, less than six months after the contract had been awarded. Remarkable, considering the fickle weather, difficult landing conditions, working on a wave-swept rock some 20 miles from civilization and the fact that all the supplies had to be brought to the island in the days of sail. Jeremiah Berry was paid \$3,700 for his effort.

Shortly after the contract was let to construct the dwelling and towers, the government issued a separate contract to Winslow Lewis to "fit-up the light-houses to be built on Matinicus Rock in the State of Maine with:

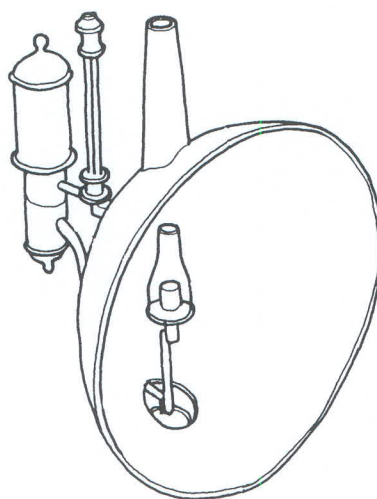
- "Seven Patent Lamps with seven sixteen inch reflectors in each lantern, the lamps in each lantern to be placed on two circles, four on the lower and three on the upper [and a host of other lantern room paraphernalia including spare lamps, oil carriers and cleaning supplies].

"All to be done in a workman-like manner within fifteen days after the light-houses shall be completed."

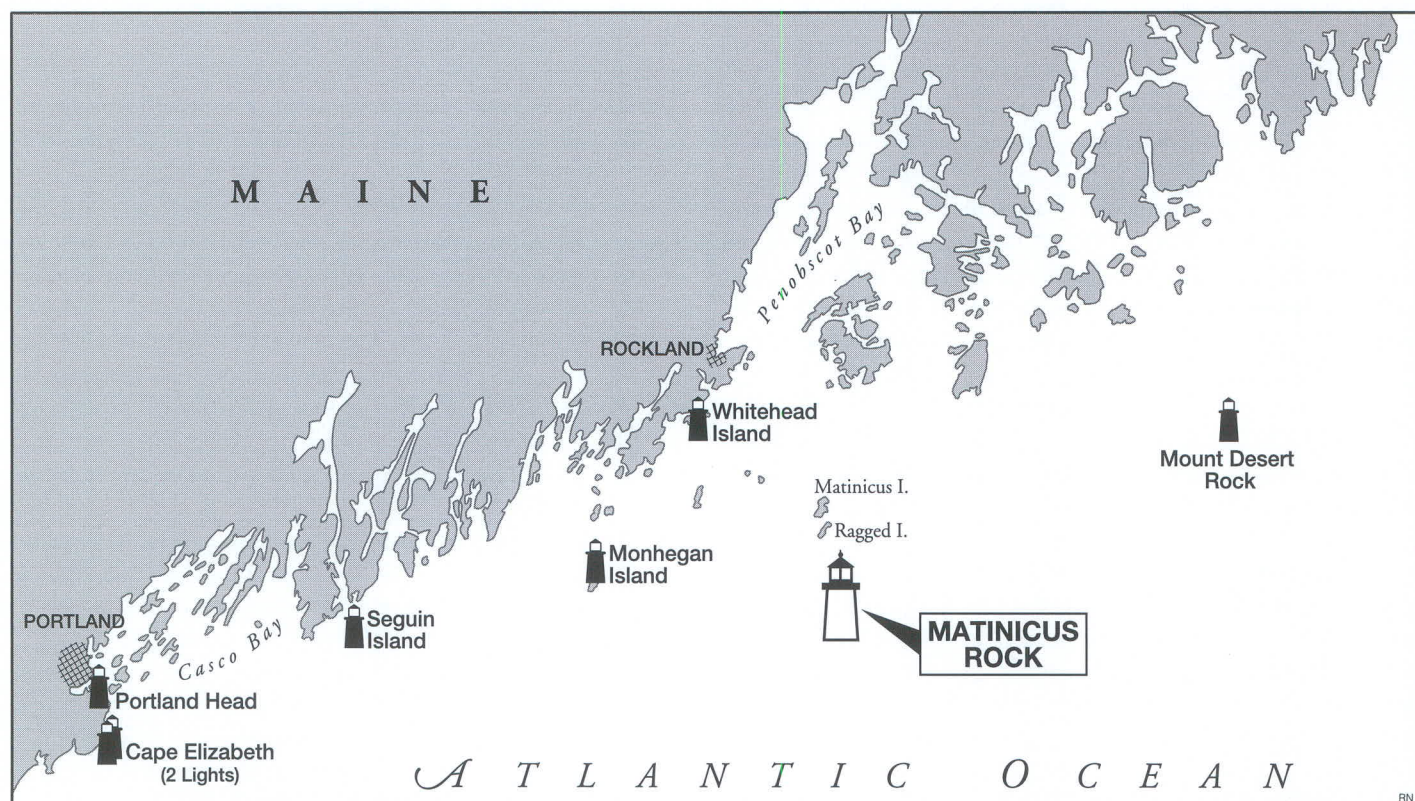
For furnishing the lantern room with his parabolic reflector system, Winslow Lewis was paid \$800, twenty-two percent of what it cost the brick-layer and his crew to construct the dwelling, two towers and cisterns.

We have mentioned Winslow Lewis in past articles of the *Log*. He raked in enormous funds from the government from 1810 until he was ousted around the time the Lighthouse Board took over in 1852. Even if his parabolic reflectors were correctly constructed, they were of very poor quality. An arrangement of seven lamps and reflectors in two tiers for the lantern rooms at Matinicus would not have been sufficient to produce more than a feeble light and certainly could not have been seen at 18 miles, which was the advertised range in the 1839 Light List.

Apparently there was competition for the position of Keeper as the following letter to the President attests:



Above — The Argand lamp and parabolic reflector.



Sir,

I have the honor to enclose the recommendations in favor of the following persons to be Keeper of the Light-house on Matinicus Rock in the State of Maine, viz: John A. Shaw, Isaac Tolman, Samuel Holmes, John Wales, William Dyer, William Young and Esaias Preble.

The appointment of John A. Shaw is respectfully submitted, and that his salary be fixed at four hundred and fifty dollars per annum.

I am, S. Pleasonton,
Fifth Auditor [Treasury]

President John Quincy Adams approved Pleasonton's recommendation of Keeper Shaw on June 26, 1827. Within a few weeks of taking charge of the lighthouse, Keeper Shaw experienced several severe storms which swept the island and damaged the wooden towers. Log entries included: "3 Sept, 1829 a heavy gail of wind to NW"; "9 Nov. 1829 a bad storm"; and, "25 Jan 1830 a vilant snow storm."

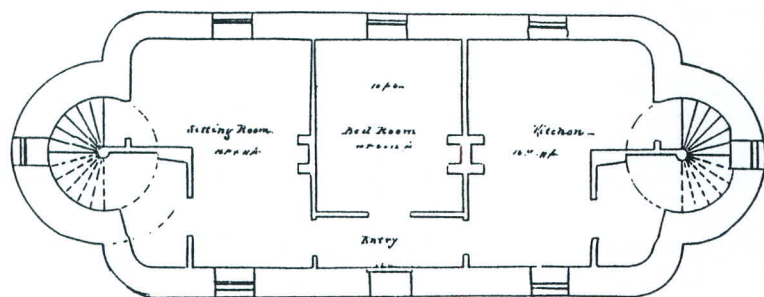
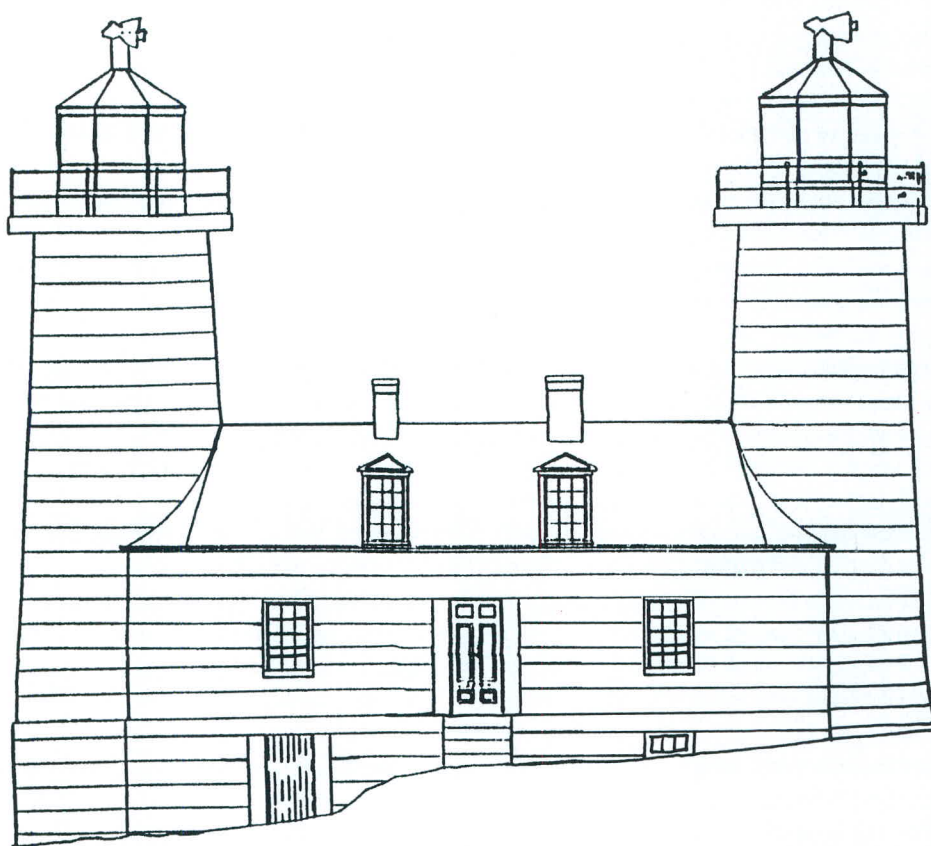
Two years after assuming the post Shaw became very sick. He was transferred to a Portland hospital and on April 29, 1831, died at the age of 69. A temporary keeper was assigned for 30 days and relieved by Phineas Spear in May of 1831. Spear became ill two years later and died in April, 1834.

In August 1838, a subsequent keeper, Mr. McKellan, was accused of keeping a poor light and made the following entry in his log:

"August 23, 1838 - As I was out afishing this morning a boat belonging to a vessel from Provincetown came alongside and inquired if we belonged to the lighthouse. Upon being informed that we did they asked why we let the lights go out last night. I told them that they were mistaken that I attended the lights last night and that they were good that I went to the lights at twelve of the clock and snuffed and trimmed them between twelve and one oclock and that they were then good and burning well and that they were burning well in the morning. This they said was fals they said that they were about three or four miles from the rock and that they were actuly out [,] that their whole crew [of] seven in number would swear that they were out. The man that we had conversation with said that the lights burned well all the first part of the night. He said that he came on deck at twenty five minutes past eleven oclock that the lights were then burning well that they began to dimer away and soon went out and remained out till two oclock [and] after that time they burnt well. At this time we had started to go ashore but he seemed determined to make it appear that the lights were out...we went back and asked them to come ashore and examine the lights as they had not been trimd for the next night. I told them that I would light the lamp so they could see how they burnt."

By the early 1840's it was apparent that the wooden towers could not continue to take the constant beating of the ocean. An 1846 report of Inspector I.W.P. Lewis (nephew and nemesis of Winslow Lewis) recommended that the station be rebuilt with taller towers and a lens of the 1st order. The Service contracted for replacement towers. An Act passed in August 1846 included an appropriation for \$11,000 to rebuild the lighthouse. The winning bid, by Gridley Bryant, came in at \$10,250.

The Lighthouse Service architect/engineer, Alexander Parris (who also designed Boston's Quincy Market and the governor's mansion in Richmond, Virginia), was less than creative with the new design. For several years mariners had complained that the two towers were too close together and that the lights appeared as one light from the



The 1846 Matinicus Lighthouse.

north and south, which are the directions that most vessels approached the island in those days. The new structure was another stone dwelling with stone towers (in lieu of wood) on each end. But the towers were only two feet further apart. The new dwelling was 42 feet long and, like the first, 20 feet wide. The new towers displayed lights 90 and 85 feet above high tide; the old lights were 63 feet above high water. However, the Service ignored I.W. P. Lewis's recommendation for a 1st order Fresnel lens and installed the same apparatus as was used in the original towers: "There are to be seven twenty one inch reflectors to each lantern with corresponding lamps and every other fixture used in First Rate Light-houses on our coast." All seven lamps and reflectors were arranged around a single tier as opposed to two levels of four and three lamps as in the original towers.

All the stone for the new construction was quarried on the island. It was a more comfortable dwelling of one and one half stories. The ground floor had a sitting room, bedroom and kitchen. The second floor contained two more bedrooms. Both bedrooms as well as the kitchen and sitting room had doors into the towers. The dwelling had two chimneys, one for the fireplace in the sitting room and one for the kitchen, with an opening into the lower and upper bedrooms to which a stove was attached.

The contractor was instructed to build the dwelling in such a manner that the first floor was seven feet above the lowest level of the area of the rock on which it was situated. The cellar walls were 2 feet 6 inches thick, the rest of the structure's walls were two feet thick.

The towers were constructed of granite, thirty feet high (to the base of lantern) with walls 2 1/2 feet thick at the bottom and tapering to one at the top. The diameter at the bottom was 13 feet narrowing to 10 feet at the top. The lantern was octagon in design and fairly similar to the original. The contract also required that the wooden towers of the old structure be torn down and removed from the island.

The work was finished in 1846. Six years later the Lighthouse Board took control of the nation's lighthouses. The Board immediately set about modernizing our lighthouses by installing new lantern rooms and Fresnel lenses. At Matinicus they agreed with the complaints of the mariner that the towers were too close together, and also that they weren't high enough.

The 1855 Annual report stated, "The lighting apparatus at Matinicus Rock is like that at Mount Desert, viz: twenty-one inch reflectors and Argand lamps, arranged in a single horizontal plane. There are two towers, and I recommend that the light be made a single revolving light. For that purpose a new tower will be required. The tower-lantern and dwelling house, independent of the lighting apparatus, will require \$27,500."

The historical record does not show why, but the Board changed its mind and constructed two towers. In 1856, Congress appropriated \$35,000 to construct the new towers, 150 feet apart, and a dwelling. The work was completed in 1857. The "old" towers were reduced to the roof of the old dwelling and incorporated into the roof line. Third order Fresnel lenses which displayed fixed white lights were installed in the new towers.

In 1853, Samuel Burgess assumed the post of keeper of the station at an annual salary of \$450. His son, B.P. Burgess, was assigned as assistant keeper at a salary of \$300. Personnel records state that both father and son were "removed" in 1861. Although we have uncovered no details, removed is the term the Service used for being fired. Their replacement was John Grant. His son, William Grant, was assigned as the 1st assistant in June, 1861, and thus began a long relationship between the Grant family and the Lighthouse Service. When Samuel Burgess left the station his daughter Abbie remained behind to instruct the new keepers. Within a short time she and young Isaac Grant fell in love and were married.

During the Civil War the Confederate cruiser *Tallahassee* sailed into Maine waters and as the Grants watched, the cruiser destroyed several fishing vessels off their station. William Grant was so incensed that he resigned (September 1864) and immediately joined the Union Navy. After the war he spent some time sailing the Great Lakes, but he eventually returned to Matinicus. In later years he told a reporter, "Sometimes after a storm when I watch the waves bursting over the ledges I just have to shout to express my feelings. I should think the sea would get worn out beating against this old rock." Young Isaac Grant assumed the position of assistant keeper when William left for the Navy.

Inexplicably, in 1867 Christopher Case was assigned as keeper and John Grant

demoted to 1st assistant. Isaac Grant became the 2nd Assistant in that year and his wife Abbie 3rd assistant on November 9, 1870. Case resigned in 1871. John Grant was again made head keeper and his son, Isaac, assistant. In 1871 son William returned to Matinicus.

In 1875, Isaac Grant and his wife Abbie were transferred to the White Head Light Station.

Matinicus Rock is enveloped in fog over 1,700 hours a year (about twenty percent of the time) making it even more hazardous to navigation. It seems strange that the Lighthouse Service, and particularly the Lighthouse Board after it assumed control, didn't recognize a need for a fog signal at the station until 1855, when a bell signal was established. Because bells are not effective in exposed locations, the signal proved inadequate and was changed to a steam-powered whistle, but not until 1876 when a brick engine house was constructed on the island. It's amazing that it took 24 years after the Board assumed control to establish an adequate fog signal on Matinicus Rock.

The 1878 Report to Congress from the Lighthouse Board stated: "A new dwelling for the assistant keeper has been erected, the roof of the keeper's dwelling re-shingled, the boat slip rebuilt, and the old stone house utilized as a water-shed for the steam fog-signal, a large brick cistern having been constructed under it for the storage of rain water."

A storm during the winter of 1877-78 swept away the brick 14 by 32 foot fog signal building. It was rebuilt during the summer of 1878, along with a brick building to hold fresh water.

In 1883, the north tower was discontinued and the characteristic of the south tower changed from a fixed white light to fixed red. But then, in 1888, the Lighthouse Board reported, "The illuminating apparatus in the northerly tower was relighted on July 1, 1888, when the characteristics were changed from one fixed red light to two fixed white lights, produced by second order burners in third order lenses. A brick house, 32 by 32 feet in plan, with a brick cistern of about 4,800 gallons capacity, was built, and the boilers and fog-signal machinery were thoroughly renovated and placed in the boiler house. The old fog-signal building was converted into an oil house."



Matinicus circa 1860's. The structure in back of the right dwelling is the bell fog signal platform. Note the station personnel. It appears that the children are standing by the left tower, Keeper in the center and Keeper's wives to the right of him. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

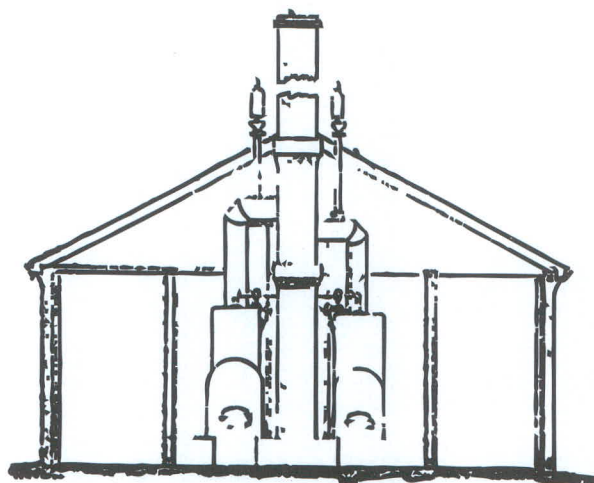


Matinicus Rock Light Station after construction of the 1857 towers, and after 1884 as the keepers in the photos are wearing uniforms. Note the original combination dwelling and towers just to the left of the right tower. The old towers have been reduced and incorporated into the roof line of the dwelling. The structure next to the right tower is the fog signal building. In this era the signal was a steam powered whistle. National Archives photo.

In 1890, a 20 by 31 foot boat house was constructed with two slips.

The 1891 Report of the Lighthouse Board provides a detailed description of Matinicus: "The single boat-slip was converted into a double one and minor repairs were made to the dwelling, tower and boat-slip. For more than twenty years and until recently, the 1st assistant keeper was the son of the principal keeper and the two lived together in one dwelling. The resignation of the principal keeper has broken up this arrangement. At this important station, which has two second order lights [meaning less than the most powerful, as the lenses were 3rd order] and a steam fog signal, a keeper and three assistant keepers are employed. These are the only people living on this rock. Two of the assistant keepers with their families, live in one double dwelling and the principal keeper lives in a separate single dwelling. These three sets of quarters are adapted only to the accommodation of three families, and a fourth set of quarters is therefore urgently necessary for the third assistant. It is estimated that a proper dwelling can be built for \$3,200 and recommendation is made that this amount be appropriated for that purpose.

"This bare rocky islet is about half a mile long and irregular of width, nowhere exceeding an eighth of a mile, and the highest part is not more than 50 feet above the sea level. There is a little cove where material can be hauled up in pleasant weather, but it has no harbor. The lighthouse keeper affects a landing by steering his boat through the breakers on top of a wave, so that it will land on the boatways, where his assistants stand ready to receive him and draw his boat so far up on the ways that a receding wave cannot carry it back to the sea. There is neither tree nor shrub and hardly a blade of grass on the rock. The surface is rough and irregular and resembles in a large way a confused pile of loose stone. Portions of the rock are frequently swept by the waves which move the huge boulders into new positions. During the storm of January 19, 1856, the sea made a complete breach over the rock, washing away every movable thing. The old dwelling was so thoroughly demolished that not one stone was left upon another. The then new dwelling, though situated in the most protected spot was flooded and heavy wooden shutters had to be closed to prevent the violence of the spray from breaking them in.



Steam whistle fog signal building.



Boat house and marine railway in foreground. Brick fog signal building and fuel tanks at top of photo. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.



Matinicus Rock Light Station in the 1890's. From left — boathouse, fog signal building, tower, old stone house, keeper's house, assistant keeper's dwelling, tower. Note the covered walkway between the towers. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.



Matinicus Rock Light Station circa 1950's. Note the helicopter in back of fog signal building, stand for a fog bell at left and that the far tower has had its lantern removed. Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.

The rock is about 20 miles from the mainland, as the crow flies. Rockland, twenty-five miles distant is the nearest harbor, unless the coves of Matinicus island, four miles from the rock, be considered as harbors. They can be entered only with certain winds by vessels of very light draught. The isolation of this station and the difficulty of landing material here of course enhance the cost of erecting the proposed structure, in which strength rather than the graces of architecture are most considered."

Congress failed to appropriate the funds for the new dwelling. The Board unsuccessfully requested funds for the additional house for the next three years. We don't know just what the arrangement for the third assistant was during that time, but in 1894 the Annual Report showed some restructuring of the existing buildings, which solved the problem. "The stone house was renovated, repaired and made habitable for the third assistant keeper...minor repairs were made to all the quarters. A railway for hauling coal from the boathouse to the fog signal house was built and a car provided. A donkey engine and boiler were installed in a small house near the boathouse for hauling boats out on the ways and hauling coal from the boathouse to the signal house..." At the end of the report the Board request-

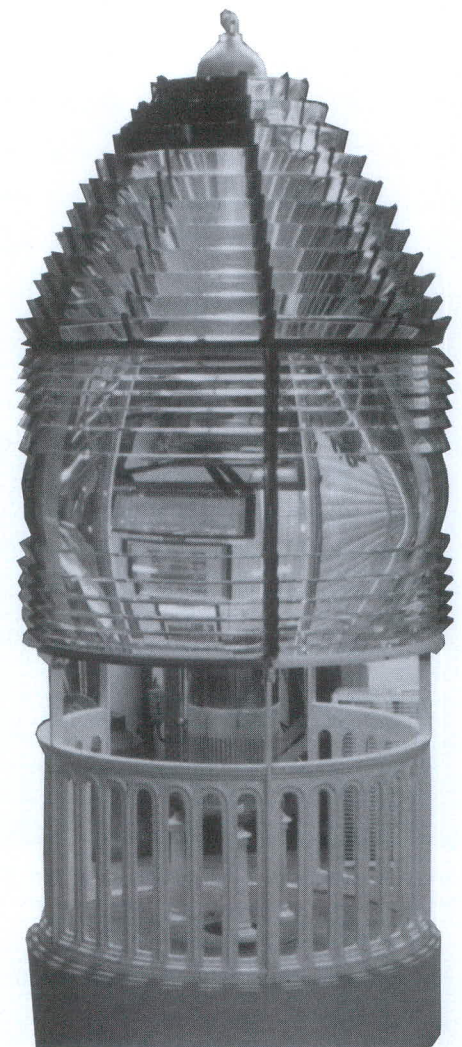
ed funding for a new dwelling for the fifth time and continued to do so for the next five years, to no avail.

In 1900, the report states, "...A stone dwelling built in 1847 was extensively repaired; the upper story was wholly and the lower story was partly rearranged...the dwelling occupied by two assistant keepers with their families was rearranged so as to entirely separate the families by giving them each a separate entrance, stairs and hall; an addition was built providing each family with a cellar containing a cistern and with a room for storage and fuel..."

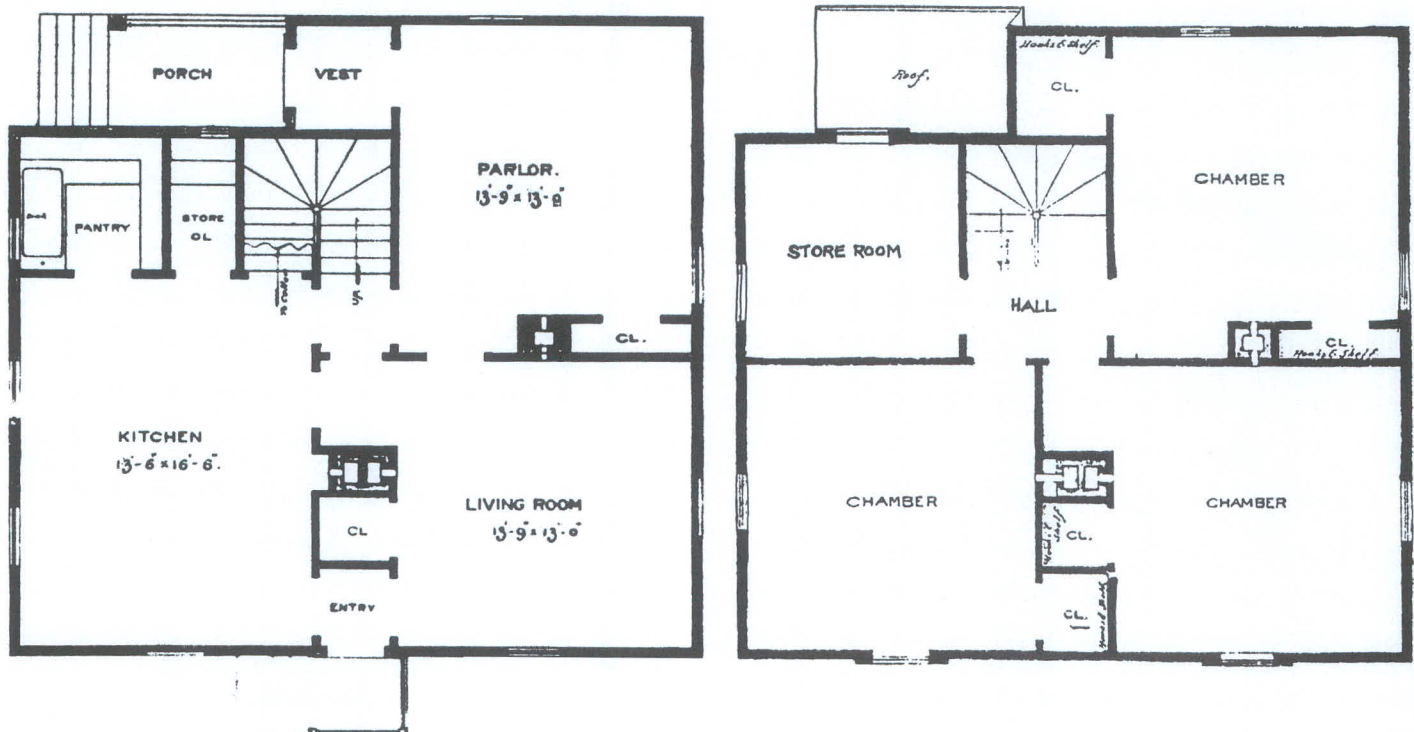
1900 was also the year that William Grant, son of Captain Grant, resigned as head keeper of the station. Over the ensuing years keepers came and went on a regular basis, some lasting only a few years.

In 1933, a storm similar to the one which raked the island in 1857 swept over the rock, inundating the kitchen of Keeper R.W. Powers. Another devastating storm struck in 1950, which so badly damaged the duplex dwelling that it was eventually torn down.

In 1983, the station was automated and the 3rd order Fresnel lens transferred to the Shore Village Museum in Rockland, Maine, where it shines today. Ownership of the island was transferred to the Audubon Society, although the Coast Guard still maintains the aids to navigation there.



Fixed 3rd Order Fresnel lens from Matinicus Rock, now on display at the Shore Village Museum in Rockland, ME. Photo by Jim Wolfrum.

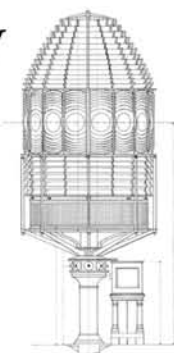




The operating tower at Matinicus Rock Light Station in recent years. Notice the wooden addition to the old stone dwelling and lantern less tower. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.



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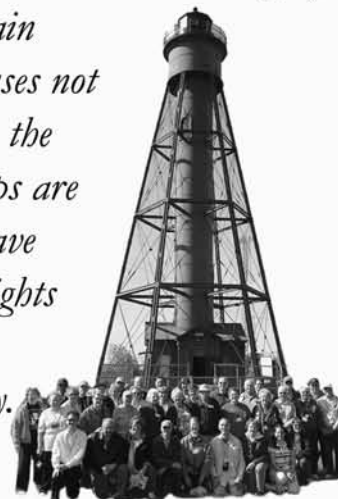
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