



Mayo Beach

Billingsgate, Cape Cod, MA
By George Worthylake



Original Mayo Beach Lighthouse, date unknown. Note the proximity of water at right and the old style lantern room. The cage around the lantern is probably to guard against waterfowl flying into the windows. National Archives photo courtesy of Admont Clark.

On November 1, 1838, Lt. Edward W. Carpender, USN, submitted a report to Secretary of the Treasury Levi Woodbury on his findings of the condition of several American light stations. The year before, due to a Congressional mandate, he was directed to conduct a survey of the condition of our lighthouses. He spent a considerable amount of time during 1838 traveling the East Coast.

In his report he noted, "... I was surprised to find a light-house building on Mayo's Beach, at the head of this harbor [Wellfleet], and wrote to you in hopes of arresting the work.

"This harbor is but four miles long, and, when vessels get within Billingsgate Light [see Keeper's Log Vol. 9, #4], they are as safe as they can be in any part of the harbor. I inquired of the people of Wellfleet the necessity for this light, and the only advantages they promised themselves from it were, in "running a straight course over the flats at high water," and "seeing the shore in winter when the snow was on the ground." This harbor, as I am informed, is frozen over most of the winter, the sea not heaving in with sufficient violence to break up the ice after it

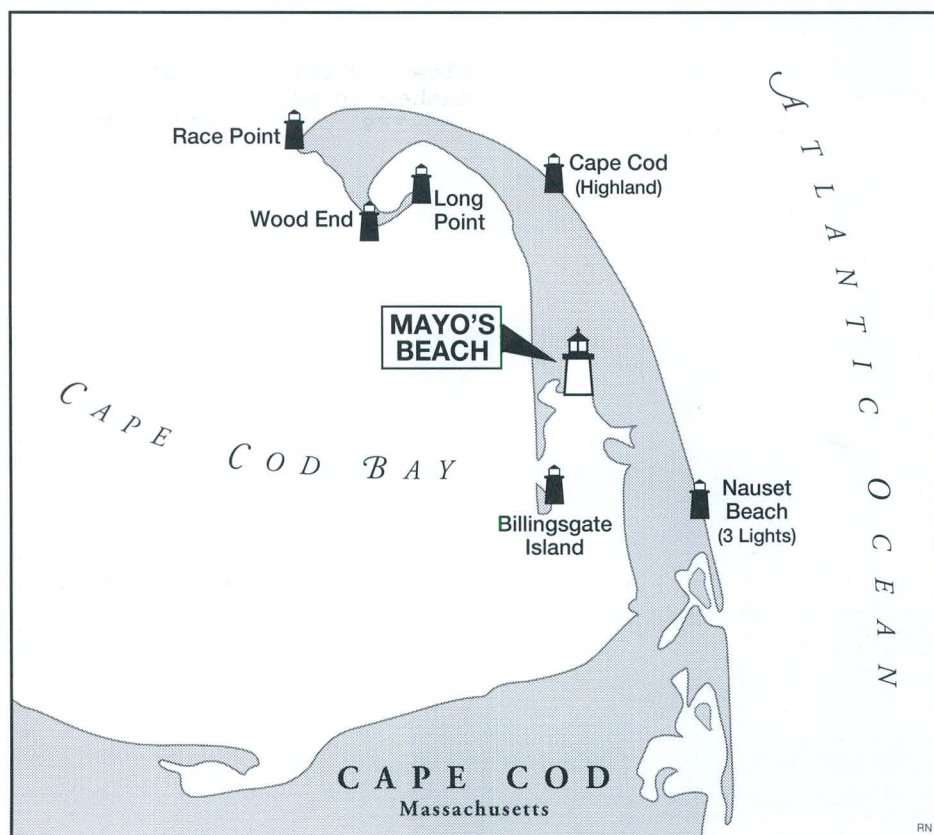
was once formed; and when the tide will admit of a straight course being made up the harbor, it can as well be done by compass as by a light. At other times the channel is too narrow and intricate to render the channel of much use, except at intervals. Some venerable old pilots and fishermen belonging to the place, whom I also consulted, declared their opinion openly and publicly against the light; and elsewhere on the Cape, when this light was mentioned, it raised a smile. Should government, however, continue of opinion that a light is necessary in this place, then I recommend it should be a tide light [ed. a minor post light], to consist of one lamp, to be lighted an hour before, and kept lit an hour after high water. But, according to my judgement, it should be entirely suppressed."

Letter of Joseph Holbrook keeper of Mayo's Beach Light, Sept. 23, 1842:

I was appointed keeper of this light on it's first being established, in the year 1838, upon a salary of \$350. The lighthouse is a brick building of four rooms, with the lantern erected upon the ridge or roof thereof, which is of wood. The walls of the house are set two feet below the natural surface of the

beach, without any other foundation. In consequence of this the cellar was flooded with water continually; in fact the tide ebbed and flowed regularly in the cellar. The oil butts were placed in the cellar; & during a very high tide, in attempting to move them and save the oil, I received a serious injury by the falling of one of these butts (containing 93 gallons) upon me. The very wretched manner in which the house was built renders it almost uninhabitable; the walls always and the roof continually leaky. In consequence of this and being compelled to use the water caught from the roof, which constitutes my only resource, two of my children have died, as I solemnly protest, on account of that unhealthy condition of the house and using stagnant water of the cistern. When it blows hard the lantern on the roof rattles & shakes as to require my constant attention to keep the light from being shaken out, breaking the tube glasses and spilling the oil. The whole weight of the lantern and its rise above the roof cause numerous leaks therein, by the manner in which it is shaken by the wind. Last summer an oil vault was built in the cellar, under the direction of James Baldwin, Esq. engineer, where the oil is perfectly secured. There were originally one lamps in this lantern, but three of them were removed some time since, and six are now used. The reflectors and lamps are bad and yield but a poor light. I consider this lighthouse to have been erected in a very shameful manner & such as no honest man would have done. There are 102 vessels belonging to the port of Wellfleet, averaging 50 tons each and they are mostly engaged in bounty fishing. This is a tide harbor, and in very severe winter is frozen. There have been three wrecks here since I took charge of this light — one of them the Brig Diligence of 270 tons. In 1839 700 sail passed here within my view. There is no well of water here of any kind, nor am I allowed any boat.

Signed Joseph Holbrook
Keeper



In spite of Lt. Carpenter's protest (as the station was being constructed) and Keeper Holbrook's letter, the Mayo Beach Lighthouse continued in operation for 87 years.

By 1878 the sea had undermined the foundation of the house, and in 1880 a cast iron tower and a new wooden house were erected. Some sources state a reflector type lamp was in use at this time; other sources indicate it was a 6th order lens, providing a steady white light. The light was improved in 1919 with the addition of an acetylene fueled lamp with a flashing characteristic.

The nearby Billingsgate Island station was abandoned to the sea in 1915, as the island on which it was located slowly sank beneath the waves. That action probably gave Mayo Beach a lease on life, at least until 1925 when it, too, was discontinued.

Mayo Beach Light was a small insignificant light station which probably should never have been constructed. It may have provided some service to local mariners and it certainly lived through many eras of lighthouse history in this country: from a young nation's growing aids to navigation system, through the era of the Lighthouse Board, the creation of the Bureau of Lighthouses and into the age of the flapper . . . beach parties and bath tub gin and . . . it seems like only yesterday!



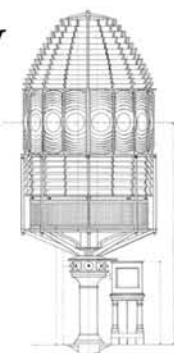
The Mayo Beach keeper's house in 1993 with the old oil house in the background. Photographer unknown.

Right - The "new" 1880 cast iron tower and keeper's house. The tower is similar to many constructed in the northeast. Photo courtesy of Admont Clark.





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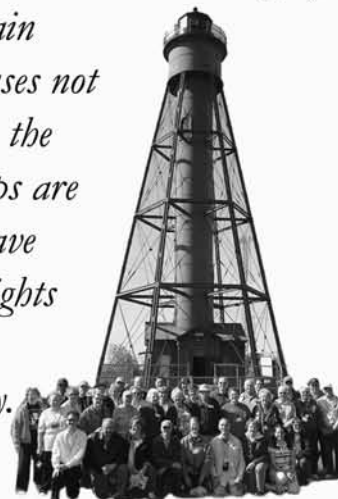
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