WELLFLEET PUBLIC LIBRARY
55 West Main Street
Wellfleet, MA 02667

HISTORY OF
BILLINGSGATE ISLAND LIGHT STATION
(WELLFLEET BAY)
MASS.

The Billingsgate Island Light Station was established by Act of Congress dated May 7, 1822, when $2000 was appropriated (Stat. L. 3, Vol. 698, Sections 1-4). This Act provided "That as soon as the jurisdiction of such portions of land at Billingsgate Island, in Barnstable Bay, or on some place in the vicinity as the President shall select for the site of the light house, shall be 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 site, to be so lighted as to be distinguished from other light houses near the same; and also to agree for the salaries, wages, or hire, of the persons to be appointed by the President for the superintendence of the same."

On June 8, 1822, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed an act to cede to the United States jurisdiction of a part of Billingsgate Island which read in part "that the consent of this Commonwealth be and hereby is granted to the United States to purchase a tract of land, not exceeding four acres, which will be found necessary for the Light House authorized by Congress to be built on Billingsgate Island in Barnstable Bay." The state retained concurrent jurisdiction "in and over said land so far as that all civil and criminal processes issued under the authority of this Commonwealth, or any officer thereof, may be executed on any part of said land, or any buildings which may be erected thereon, in the same way and manner as though this consent had not been granted as aforesaid."

On July 9, 1822, Elisah Cobb of Brewster, Barnstable County, Mass. "in consideration of $100 paid by Henry H. S. Dearborn, Collector of the District of Boston and Charlestown, for and on account of the U. S. A." did "give, grant, sell and convey unto the U. S. A., a tract of land situated on Billingsgate Island in Barnstable County, bounded as follows: Beginning at low water mark due west from a stake on the bank of said island and running due east of said stake, then due east 20 rods to a stake, thence south to low water mark on the southern shore of said island, thence following the shore to the first named bounds, - the same containing four acres more or less xxx."

It was on this land that the original light house was built in 1822.

In a report by Lieutenant Edw. W. Carpender, USN, dated New York, November 1, 1838, on this light station the following appears:

"Billingsgate Light - Fifteen miles from Barnstable, along the western shore of Cape Cod, at the entrance to Wellfleet bay and harbor, stands Billingsgate Light. This is a useful light to this navigation. It is larger, however, than is necessary. There are eight lamps in it with 13½ inch reflectors in two equal and parallel series. Race Point is but 15 miles off; afterwards Provincetown Harbor Light has to be passed; and if

vessels come from the south shore, they can make but a short run before they arrive at this light, which is 40 feet above the level of the sea. I doubt not one of the present series would be sufficient, but I shall recommend six lamps, suppressing two as entirely superfluous. The six to be compactly arranged to suit the navigation."

"I visited this light in the afternoon, and found the keeper absent to a distance, without having first prepared his lamps, reflectors, and glass for the night. Indeed, the reflectors had the appearance of not having been burnished for some time. Premises in sufficient order.

"There is a rock to the eastward of this light, directly in the channel way of the harbor, called Channel Rock, which has damaged many vessels. Agreeably to the wishes of the people of Wellfleet, and in accordance with my own judgement, I recommend a buoy for this rock."

The Lieutenant found no justification for another "lighthouse building on Mayo's Beach, at the head of this harbor" then being erected and "according to my judgement, it should be entirely suppressed."

In the 1852 Report of the Chairman of the Light House Board there is the following:

"Billingsgate island, Wellfleet bay, requires protection. There has been expenditure made for this object sometime heretofore, but from the present appearance of the work, I cannot trace the design of the particular object sought to be obtained beyond that of the immediate protection of the house. The work, however, appears to have been left in an unfinished state, and wherever large rocks have been left there has been an accumulation of sand and a partial increase of the shore. I therefore propose, during the next year, to properly arrange the loose stone that are now there, and procure enough more to make the island secure; for which I ask for an appropriation of $2000."

"I consider the protection of this island and light of first importance, as it is the only harbor of refuge from a southeast gale in Cape Cod Bay for vessels that have been unable to make Provincetown harbor."

As a result of this recommendation, Congress on August 3, 1854, (Stat. L. 10 Vol. 336, Sect. 1) appropriated $2,000 "for the preservation of the site of Billingsgate Island Light House (Wellfleet)."

The 1855 fiscal year report of the Chairman of the Light House Board states: "The repairs at this place during the last year were carried away by a gale during the winter (1854-55) and the balance on hand will hardly be sufficient to preserve the light house during the present winter (1854-55). The previous history of this island would indicate that it would be better and cheaper to build a new light house on screw piles, than to make further attempts to secure the permanency of the present site. I therefore ask an appropriation of $14,000 for that purpose."

Congress complied on August 18, 1856, by appropriating $14,000 "for the erection of a light house on a proper foundation, on or near Billingsgate

Island, in place of the present one." (Stat. L. 11, Vol. 96, Sect. 1). This sum was spent $724.17 in 1857, $10,000 in 1858 and $3,275.83 in 1859 for the erection of the new light house.

In a deed dated July 4, 1857, Michael Collins and B.H.A. Collins both of Eastham, Barnstable County, Mass., deeded to the United States for $150.00 six acres of land on Billingsgate Island for the new light house. This was approved by an act of the Commonwealth legislation approved May 4, 1857.

On June 30, 1858, the Board reported: "The rebuilding of Billingsgate Island, commenced August, 1857, is finished." The new light was lighted for the first time on September 1, 1858.

The cistern was renewed in 1863 and in 1868 plank platforms around the buildings were renewed, the walk from the dwelling to the landing relaid and other repairs made.

The illuminating apparatus and fixtures were overhauled in 1869, two lamps being fitted with cups and plugs and the burners retubed. The brick walls of the tower and dwelling were repaired, pointed and painted. The report adds: "The walls of the dwelling have settled slightly, and it is feared that firm foundation was not secured in the sand upon which the station is located." During the month of March, 1870, the sea broke through the beach on the northeasterly point of the island and flooded a part of the light house lot, but there was no recurrence and no immediate danger to the structure was apprehended.

In his book "Famous Lighthouses of New England" (Yankee Publishing Co., 72 Broad Street, Boston, Publishers - 1945) Mr. Edward Rowe Snow cites some interesting entries in the journal of the keeper of Billingstate Island Lighthouse Station, Mr. Herman Dill:

"1872 - Sept. 14 - The lighthouse looks on the East End.

Sept. 31 - One hundred and Eight Visitors went up the tower the Last Quarter. 928 Vessels past the Light House the Last Quarter.

Dec. 21 - Snowing Again to Knight 4 Knights in succesaion.

1873 Jan. 12 - My oil is so Hard that i hav to Dip it out.

Jan. 29 - the island is Cevord over with Snow and ice the tower is a glare of ice and frost.

Nov. 18 - An exceptionally high tide Nov. 18 & flooded tower floor to depth of 2 inches

1874 Nov. 28 - The Sch Ira Milhern ran on a Rock and Sunk in Wellfleet Bay.

1875 Jan. 29 - There is the most ice in and Round this Island that I ever saw. Nothing but ice as far as I Can See.

(2)

1875 Feb. 7 – it has been very Cold here for the Last Month and the most ice that i ever see in this Rigen We are almost buried up in it. No salt water to be seen from the Island i hav not Seen a Living man for over a month no prospect for the Better. I do get the Blues some times to think i Can't (get) here from the main so pend up with ice that i Can Not Move in either Direction for the ice is 15 feet high in some places.

Feb. 11 – The ice has made a move to go.

Feb. 12 – I thought the ice was going out but the next day it was all back again with Eight vessels in it hard and fast.

Feb. 22 – the Day that George Washington was born 1732 it has been 143 years ... there is 11 Boats or ice boats on the ice to Day between this Island and Wellfleet all ICE.

Mar. 1 – there is today 13 Schooners in the ice and one Brig and there are two Steamers A triing to get them out.

Mar. 17 – I left this Island for the first time for 70 days

Nov. 17 – i do not know but the Island will All wash away for i never Saw the Tide So high since I have been on four years There ought to have been something done last summer

1876 Mar. 26 – the very worst storm for the winter was Last Night"

The above entry was the last entry made by Keeper Herman Dill. The very next day he was found dead at sea in his lighthouse dory. The new keeper Thomas K. Payne took charge of the station April 1, 1876. He had formerly been at Billingsgate from 1860 to 1869. One of his entries was

"1882 Feb. 22 – The middle of the Island was flooded five feet of water within fifteen feet of Lighthouse .... the Island lost thirty feet."

Captain Payne retired on June 30, 1884. He was succeeded by J. W. Ingalls who remained until 1892.

In 1888 the Light House Board reported: "The sea is rapidly encroaching upon this island and threatens the early submergence of the station. The beach was resurveyed and a contract was made for building and finishing by October 31, 1888, brush and stone jetties for its protection." In 1889: "Some 560 feet of plank bulk-head and 585 feet of jetties of timber, brush and stones were built by contract for the protection of the light-house site. The continued encroachment of the sea upon the easterly end of the bulk-heads and jetties threatened to extend beyond and destroy them. This encroachment was arrested by altering the direction of and extending the bulk-head and jetties

respectively 100 feet and 80 feet, and protecting the beach with brush mattresses. The deposit of sand has nearly filled the spaces between many of the jetties, which seem to be accomplishing the purpose for which they were constructed."

The 1891 report states: "The plank bulk-head and jetties of brush and stone, built in 1888 to arrest the rapid encroachment of the sea upon the light house site, which threatened to soon reach the structure itself, were exceptionally efficacious, and the entire works are now buried in the sand which they have accumulated."

In 1899 a brick cistern was built and ventilator cut through the stone underpinning of the oil room. In 1903 a bulk-head 35 feet long was built to protect the light house site from the sea. Next year an outside course of bricks was built around the light tower and a brick oilhouse built. In 1905 about 500 running feet of sand catching bulk-heads were built.

According to Snow:[1] "In 1915 the sea began to undermine Billingsgate Light again. Ropes were used to prevent the tower from falling while men climbed up to remove the lens and lighting apparatus from the old beacon. When the tower was finally abandoned, the light shone on each night without a single interruption. One evening it appeared from the cupola of a private house and later from a temporary structure erected near the old beacon. The light continued to gleam from the temporary structure, which was reinforced and made permanent. In 1922, however, exactly 100 years after its first establishment, Billingsgate Light was discontinued."

Written by Mr Eldridge Historical Records USCG
Jan 1950

1. Ibid.