Boston Harbor Light Station

National Historic Landmark Study

Designated: January 29, 1964

Boston Harbor was first included on the ***National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings*** *using the following narrative written by S. Sidney Bradford in 1963:*

Sailing vessels and steamships approaching Boston have been safely guided into the city's harbor by a friendly light on the rocky south side of Little Brewster Island since 1716. It is highly doubtful that any other lighthouse site in the New World has been used longer than that on this small island before Boston.

Massachusetts' regard for the seafarer stimulated the construction of the two light houses that have stood on Little Brewster Island. The Colony of Massachusetts Bay spent L2,385:17:8 to erect the original lighthouse on the island and its light first shone in September, 1716. The tall tower's beacon continued to warn ships away from dangerous rocks until June, 1776, when the British blew up the structure after General George Washington compelled them to evacuate Massachusetts' capital. As the redcoats withdrew, they planted a time fuse and the resulting explosion destroyed the tower. Throughout the remainder of the Revolution no light appeared on the island, but with the return of peace in 1783 the Massachusetts General Court authorized the construction of a new lighthouse. The builders of the new tower evidently followed the plan of the old lighthouse, probably incorporating the remaining wall of the destroyed tower in the new structure. Finished in 1783, the lighthouse was operated by the Commonwealth until 1790, when on June 10 Massachusetts ceded the light to the United States.

Some changes have been made in the lighthouse since its construction. Because of the appearance of dangerous cracks in 1809, workmen placed six heavy iron bands around the tower in order to strengthen it. A circular staircase was placed inside in 1844 and in 1859 fourteen feet were added to the tower's original seventy-five foot height.

The present lighthouse, as had its predecessor, first used oil lamps in its tower. Sixteen such lamps, for example, were at the top of the building in 1789. The govern ment placed Argand lamps, a vastly improved oil-burning light, in the lighthouse in 1811 and constructed a revolving apparatus for them. With the outbreak of the War of 1812, the keeper darkened his lamps so that the British could not benefit from their light. The light was also extinguished during World War II.

The Boston Light is still a primary light and it throws a 100,000 candle-power beam every thirty seconds. A light ship six miles to the east and a more powerful light on the Graves, however, have decreased the former importance of the old light.
The cannon that stands beside the lighthouse served for many years as the lighthouse's fog signal. Massachusetts Bay, as a result of a request by the keeper of the first light, supplied the cannon in 1719 and for the next 132 years it boomed out in warning whenever fog descended. Only in 1851 did the Government place a bell near the light for fog warnings, thus ending the long and honorable career of the cannon, which is probably the oldest fog signal in the country.

Present Condition: The United States Coast Guard keeps the lighthouse in excellent condition. Several maintenance buildings stand at the foot of the tower and nearby is a large house for the station's complement.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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George R. Putnam, *Lighthouses and Lightships of the United States* (Boston, 1933), 1-2, 5, 7-10

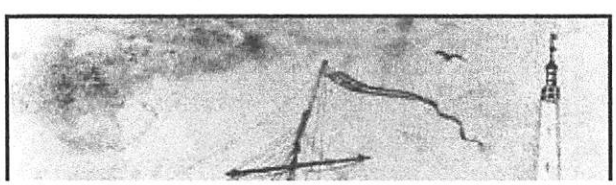
Edward R. Snow, *Famous Lighthouses of America* (New York, 1955), 39-40

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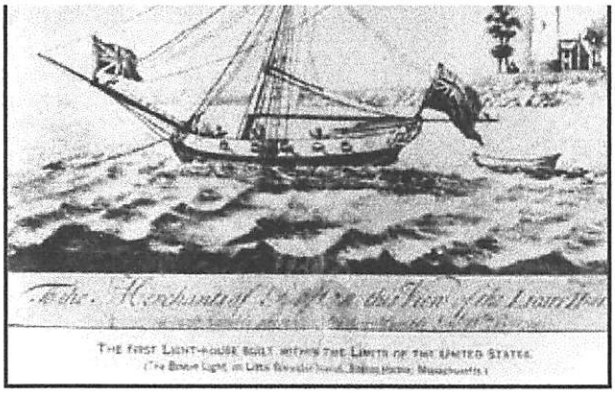
In 1977, the following National Register nomination was completed by Polly M. Rettig for Boston Harbor Light using the same sources as previous documentation:

Present and Original Physical Appearance

Boston Light is located at the southeastern tip of Little Brewster Island some 2 miles east of Boston in Massachusetts Bay. The island is approximately 800 feet long (eastwest) and has a maximum width of 250 feet. The lighthouse, a white-painted, tapering tower, rises from the island's highest point, some 18 feet above sea level, to a height of 89 feet. The structure is built of rubble stone, brick, and granite and is lined with brick. A 96-step spiral iron staircase gives access to two iron-railed decks and the glass and iron lantern at its top. The entrance to the lighthouse, located on the north (landward) side is covered by a one-story, one-room stone structure which also serves as a museum area.



The Boston Light went into operation on September 14, 1716. Accidental fires in 1720 and 1751 caused considerable damage to the interior of the structure but in each case it was quickly repaired and put back in service. During 1774-76 the lighthouse was held by the British forces occupying Boston. It remained in operation until July, 1775, when American raiding parties twice set it on fire (at that time it was encased in oaken staves covered with wood



THE FIRST LIGHT-HOUSE BUILT WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE UNITED STATES.

shingles). When the British withdrew from Boston in March, 1776, they planted a time-charge at the lighthouse; the resulting explosion destroyed the top of the structure. The light was then abandoned until 1783 when the Massachusetts legislature authorized its reconstruction. The builders apparently followed the ori-inal plans and incorporated the remaining sections of the 1716 structure in the new tower.

In 1809, following the appearance of dangerous cracks, six heavy iron bands (three are now visible) were placed around the lighthouse to strengthen it. The spiral iron staircase was erected in the tower in 1844 and in 1859 the structure's height was increased from its original 75 to the present 89 feet. Since that time no major structural changes have been made.
The reconstructed lighthouse was first illuminated with oil lamps as its predecessor had been; sixteen such lamps were in use at the top of the tower in 1789. These were replaced in 1811 with Argand lamps, a greatly improved oil-burning system employing a hollow circular wick in a glass chimney, the whole mounted on a revolving 'case. The efficiency of the lighthouse was further improved with the subsequent introduction of the Fresnel lens system, based on a central bull's-eye lens surrounded by concentric prismatic rings, and the use of electricity for the light source. In 1945 Boston Light's beam was rated at 100,000 candlepower. The present equipment, installed in 1962, consists of a 1,500 watt bulb at the center of a twelve-sided Fresnel lens. The beam, flashed for 7/10ths of a second, once every 10 seconds, is rated at 2-million candlepower and visible f'or 16 miles.



The operation of Boston Light is supported by several other structures on Little Brewster Island. At the base of the tower on the south (seaward) side is a second one-story, oneroom stone structure which houses a diesel generator for emergency power and the air compressor for the foghorn mounted outside. On the lee (north) side of the island is the one-story wooden rain shed; its hip roof collects rainwater, channeling it into a 20,000 gallon tank inside. Further to the west is the 1 1/2-story frame and clapboard house occupied by the lighthouse crew of two, sometimes three men. Twin concrete and steel piers are located at the western (lower) end of the island; a marine railway between them runs from the shore to a wooden boathouse. All of the structures are regularly maintained and appear to be in good condition.

Statement of Significance

The site of the Boston Light, on the southeastern tip of Little Brewster Island in Massachusetts Bay, has been used for that purpose longer than any other lighthouse site in the United States. The original Boston Light, the first lighthouse in the country, operated from 1716 until 1776, when it was exploded by the British forces evacuating Boston. The present stone and brick tower, incorporating portions of the original, was completed in 1783.

The original Boston Light was erected by the Province of Massachusetts Bay, the present structure by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The light was ceded to the Federal Government in 1790 and was operated by the U.S. Lighthouse Service until 1939 when it was transferred to the U.S. Coast Guard. Visitors are welcome at Little Brewster Island during daylight hours but are not allowed to climb the tower.

Historical Background

Following a successful campaign begun by Boston merchants in 1713, the Province of Massachusetts Bay authorized the construction of the first lighthouse in America on Little Brewster Island in M-assachusetts Bay. Completed at a cost of L2,385:17:8, the structure was placed in operation on September 14, 1716. At the request of the first lighthouse keeper, in 1719 Massachusetts provided a cannon which could be used as a vrarning signal during heavy fogs; the first such signal in the country, it was not replaced until 1851. Accidental fires damaged the interior of the lighthouse in 1720 (started by drippings from the oil lamp) and again in 1751, but in both cases it was quickly returned to service.

With the outbreak of the American Revolution, Boston Light became a military objective. The British command at Boston had taken over control of the lighthouse in 1774 and kept it in operation until early July, 1775, when an American raiding party succeeded in setting it on fire. The British stationed Marines on Little Brewster Island and began repairs of the danaged structure. However, on July 31, a 300-man party, under orders from General Washington, stormed the island and again fired the lighthouse. They were forced to retreat but left the lighthouse totally unserviceable. Before the British withdrew from Boston the following March, they planted a time-charge in the tower which completely destroyed its upper portion.
Boston Light remained abandoned until 1783 when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts authorized its reconstruction. The builders apparently followed the original plans and incorporated the remaining sections of the earlier tower in the new structure. The Commonwealth operated the tower until 1790, when control was ceded to the Federal Government (U.S. Lighthouse Service).

During the War of 1812 the light was dimmed to reduce its usefulness to enemy ships; a similar practice was followed during World War I. In 1939 the United States Coast Guard assumed control of Boston Light. The light was completely extinguished during World War II (1941 - July 1945), but has been in continuous operation since that time. Though few structural changes have been made in the Boston Light since 1783, its

illuminating equipment has steadily improved. The present system, installed in 1962, produces a 2-million candlepower beam visible for 16 miles.

Lighthouse Heritage

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