South Hyannis Light

by

Thomas Ireland

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CAPE COD
COMMUNITY COLLEGE



South Hyannis Light

Thesis: South Hyannis Light served Hyannis Harbor as a range light for nearly one hundred years.

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b. D. S. Hallett

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2. Records of oil used

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B. 1851

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- 1. "Pilot John" Lothrop

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1. A. Lothrop

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1. John A. Peak

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A. One hundred years of service

For nearly one hundred years South Hyannis Light served Hyannis Harbor asaa range light. The light was built in 1840 as a result of Daniel Snow Hallett's strong feeling that mariners needed a range light to guide them into Hyannis Harbor.

The original lighthouse was a small shack that Captain Hallett moved to the shore. It consisted of one room and a loft. He equipped it with a reflector and whale oil lantern. On May 1, 1849, Captain Hallett received his letter of instructions from Joseph P. Pease, Collector of Customs ar Edgartown, which read:

> You will light the lamps in the Hyannis Lighthouse for the first time, on May next, May 1st, at sunset, and extinguish them, at sunrise. After, light, extinguish them, at sun setting and sun rising, each day . . . .[1]

Captain Hallett's son, D. B. Hallett, helped his father build the lighthouse and later wrote:

> As a boy of ten or twevle I often used to walk from Pickering's Cove where my father lived, down across the fields two miles, to the light after school at night, to light the lamp and remain all night alone, with only my dog Pilot as company; then return home in the morning in time to get breakfast and gotto school.[2]

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[1] D. G. Trayser, Barnstable- Three Centuries of a Cape Cod Town (Hyannis, 1939) p. 413.

[2] Ibid., p. 413.

After the completion of the lighthouse, directions for coming into Hyannis Harbor were given in the Barnstable Patriot on May 9, 1849, as follows:

> The lighthouse recently erected at Hyannis, will be lighted up for the first time on the eve of Monday, May 7. The following directions are given for sailing into that harbor:
>
> When coming from the eastward bring Point Gammon Light to bear NNE in three and a half fathoms water, and steer NW on which course you will have from three and a half fathoms to quarter less three. When the light on the bank bears N1-2E run for it, which course will carry you two cables length from the east end of the breakwater. Give it a good birth towards the shore, and round to in two and a half to three fathoms water.
>
> When coming from the westward bring Point Gammon Light to bear E by N or E N1-2N and run for it till the light on the bank bears N by E1-2E and run for it as above.[3]

South Hyannis Light was used in conjunction with a small light on the wharf in front of the lighthouse. The light on the wharf was a small wooden tower about twenty feet in height. The light consisted of an oil lantern which was mounted on a cast iron base and had to be hoisted up and down by a chain into the top of the tower. The chain had a mark to show when the light

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[3]Barnstable Patriot, Vol. XIX No. 45, May 9, 1849, Whole No. 981.

was up high enough within the tower, and then it was hooked as the light would not be looked after until the next morning.[4]

On interesting sidelight of the wharf light was the wharf light 'Battle'. It happened when Captain John Peak was keeper: it seems that the railroad would leave its cars next to the light in such a manner as to block it. Captain Peak would have to come down to the wharf and argue with the railroad to get them to move the cars.[5]

After Captain Hallett's shack, a house was erected with a cement tower next to it for the lamp. The tower was connected to a smaller building which was used as the cook house. The tower was about twenty-five feet high with an iron walk around it which added another two feet and then there was the light with the black gallery which made a total of about thirty-two feet in height.[6]

The lamp had an eighteen inch reflector with a bull's eye lens. The whole lamp was set in a balanced compass in order to keep it level in case the tower moved.[7] It was fixed white with a red sector which covered the Hyannis Port Breakwater and South West Ledge. Coming

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[4]Howard Peak, Interview October 30, 1965.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

Coming into the Hyannis Harbor from the east, one would keep the white sector within view, for to go into the red sector would mean dangerous waters.[8] Besides the main lamp there was also big tallow candles about two inches in diameter and ten inches long, kept for emergency use in case the main lamp failed.[9]

All captains learned to identify lighthouses by their colors, and South Hyannis Light became to be known as "The white house with the white tower."[10]

Oil used at the light was stored in five gallon cans in a small shed in front of the building. This shed was the only completely fireproof building that any lighthluse had at that time. The roof was made of slate and sat on brick walls with a cement floor.[11]

South Hyannis Light was classified as secondary light in the second district under the Life Saving Service. Maine was the first and Massachusetts and Rhode Island were the second. It was later changed to the first district when the Coast Guard took over the Life Saving Service.[12]

Just because it was a secondary light did not mean

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[8]Rear Admiral Thompson, Interview October 28, 1965.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Howard Peak, interview October 30, 1965.

[12]Rear Admiral Thompson.

that it was not used. Many schoomers used it to guide them to safty behind the Hyannis Port Breakwater during some of the fierce northeast storms in the area. In an interview, Mr. Murray said:

> Many a captain has come up the bank to thank the light keeper for being there during a storm and keeping the light going . . . I have seen up to twenty-five schooners in the harbor at one time.[13]

Life at Hyannis Light was very humdrum.[14] The light use to be called the "Bug Light"[15], by the nieghbors.[15] The keeper's daily routine was always to keep the light shipshape in case an inspection was called. These inspections not only included the light but also the house. The inspector would go all though the light and then go into the house to see how well the keeper's wife kept things, and if she was not neat the keeper was sure to hear about it.[16]

In preparing for these inspections the keeper had to keep all the glass around the lamp clean. During the winter he would have to rub down the outside of the glass with glycerine in order to keep the frost and the snow off.[17] Curtains were always put around the lamp during the day to keep the sun off the lens and the

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[13]Chester Murray, interview October 28, 1965.

[14]Howard Peak

[15]George Walsh, interview October 13, 1965.

[16]Howard Peak.

[17]Rear Admiral Thompson

reflectors. The keeper also had to keep a 'Day Book'[18] of the consumption of the oil used by both the main light and the light on the wharf. The record kept had to be within a pint of the oil used.

Supplies were brought to the lighthouse by lighthouse tenders. During its years of service, four lighthouse tenders served South Hyannis Light. These included the Verbena, Azalea, Anemone, and the Heawatha.[19] Supplies brought in were such things as case oil, coal, cement and once ~~the tenders had to bring in~~ a lot of iron in order to mend the iron railing around the tower.[20] The tenders would bring five hundred gallons of oil once a year,[21] which ~~and~~ had to be carried up the bluff to the oil shed. ~~The oil was~~ in five gallon cans Every once in a while a tender would carry a lamp expert from Woods Hole to South Hyannis Light to adjust the flow of oil into the lamp.[22] The tenders use to come to the east side of the wharf until it filled in, after which they would anchor off the end the of the wharf

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[18]Howard Peak.

[19]George Walsh.

[20]Rear Admiral Thompson.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

and row the supplies in.[23]

Although the majority of the days were humdrum, one of the more interesting days must have been in the Fall of 1874 when President Grant came over from Nantucket and landed at the wharf.[24]

In its eighty-one years of service, South Hyannis Light had a total of eight keepers. Its first keeper, Captain Daniel S. Hallett, built the original lighthouse and was keeper from 1849 until James Bearse was appointed keeper under President Fillmore in 1851. Under President Pierce, Captain Almoran Hallett, brother of Captain Daniel S. Hallett became keeper. In 1861, Captain Franklin Baker was keeper. In 1869, Captain "Pilot John" Lothrop maintained it with his son, Alonzo F. Lothrop, as assistant. After his father's death in 1878, Alonzo was keeper until he retired on October 2, 1899. On Captain 1, 1899, Captain John A. Peak took it over until 1915. Then Waldo Leighton was keeper until the light was discontinued on June 30, 1929.[25]

While Captain John A. Peak was keeper many children within the area would come down to the light and get John to teach them how to sail.[26] Captain Peak would help them sail but only if they knew how to swim and could prove it to him. The kids would also want to help around

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[23]Ibid.

[24]George Walsh.

[25]Barnstable Patriot, Ibid.

[26]Robert Boody, interview October 13, 1965.

the lighthouse and Captain Peak would let them shine brass, but it is doubtful if he appreciated the work because he often said: "One boy is a whole boy; two boys is a half and three boys is no boy at all!"[27]

Also while keeper, Captain Peak rigged a mirror in his bedroom so that he could just see the lamp at night. When asked about the mirror, he would answer: "Why should I get up to look when I can see it in the mirror?"[28]

The light was decommissioned on June 30, 1930,[29] and was replaced by a light on the end of the breakwater. The following appeared in the Barnstable Patriot July 4, 1930:

> South Hyannis Light abandoned after blinking out its warning for the last time Sunday Night The lighthouse at South Hyannis closed Monday. The light has been in almost constant use for the past eighty years. A modern automatically operated range light placed at the end of the breakwater takes the place of the lighthouse.
>
> The lighthouse keeper, Waldo Leighton and his family left Monday on the lighthouse tender Anenmone for Nobscussett, where he will be assistant keeper. Many of the neighbors were on hand to bid the family farewell.
>
> The closing of the lighthouse recalled to the mind of the older residents, incidents connected with the light during its 80 years of service and also the staunch-hearted men who kept its light burning through fog and storm . . .[30]

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[27]Howard Peak.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Cape Cod Lighthouses (Falmouth, 1938).

[30]Barnstable Patriot, Vol. XXXX No. 22.

After being decommissioned, the government removed the lamp and sold the lighthouse by auction. Miss. Stevenson bought the lighthouse and remodeled part of it. In 1934 she sold it to Mr. McCargo who added on to it. In fact, he added more than the original size of the house and the neighbors use to call it "The tail that wagged the dog."[31] Mrs McCargo later sold it to Judge Paul Swift in 1950. It was later bought by Mr. Volpe (not the Governor) in 1961.

An unauthentic report turned up in ~~doing~~ my research on South Hyannis Light. An idea which half the people interviewed agreed on was that the lamp used was the same one used previously at Point Gammon Light. The records show that Point Gammon was in use from 1816 until 1858 and South Hyannis Light from 1849 until 1930. When asked about this, Rear Admiral Thompson replied: "It is very doubtful that the same lamp was used at South Hyannis Light, because they were always making new and better lamps." Also there was an old barn that was fleated over from Great Island when Point Gammon was decommissioned (the barn is still standing today). In conclusion it is my belief that someone, in relating the story of the barn, could not remember what was moved

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[31]Howard Peak.

and decided that it must have been the lamp , thus starting the folklore of South Hyannis Light.

South Hyannis Light cast its light out over the waters of Hyannis Harbor for nearly one hundred years. In 1930 its light was turned out and a part of Hyannis's history forgotten.

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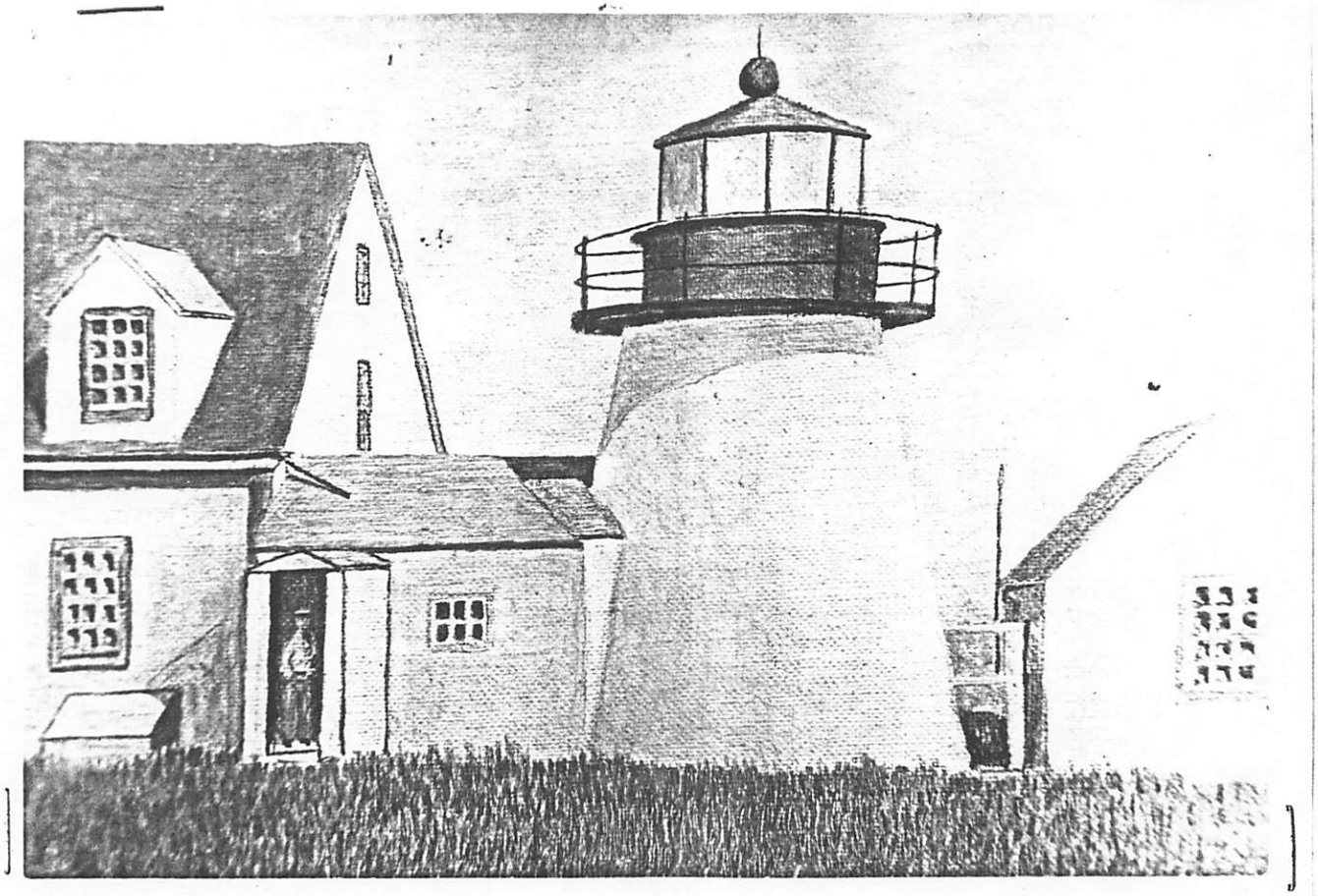
Mr. Robert Boody, Hyannis resident. Interwiew: October 13, 1965.

Mr. Howard Peak, summer resident of Hyannis. Interview: October 13, 1965.

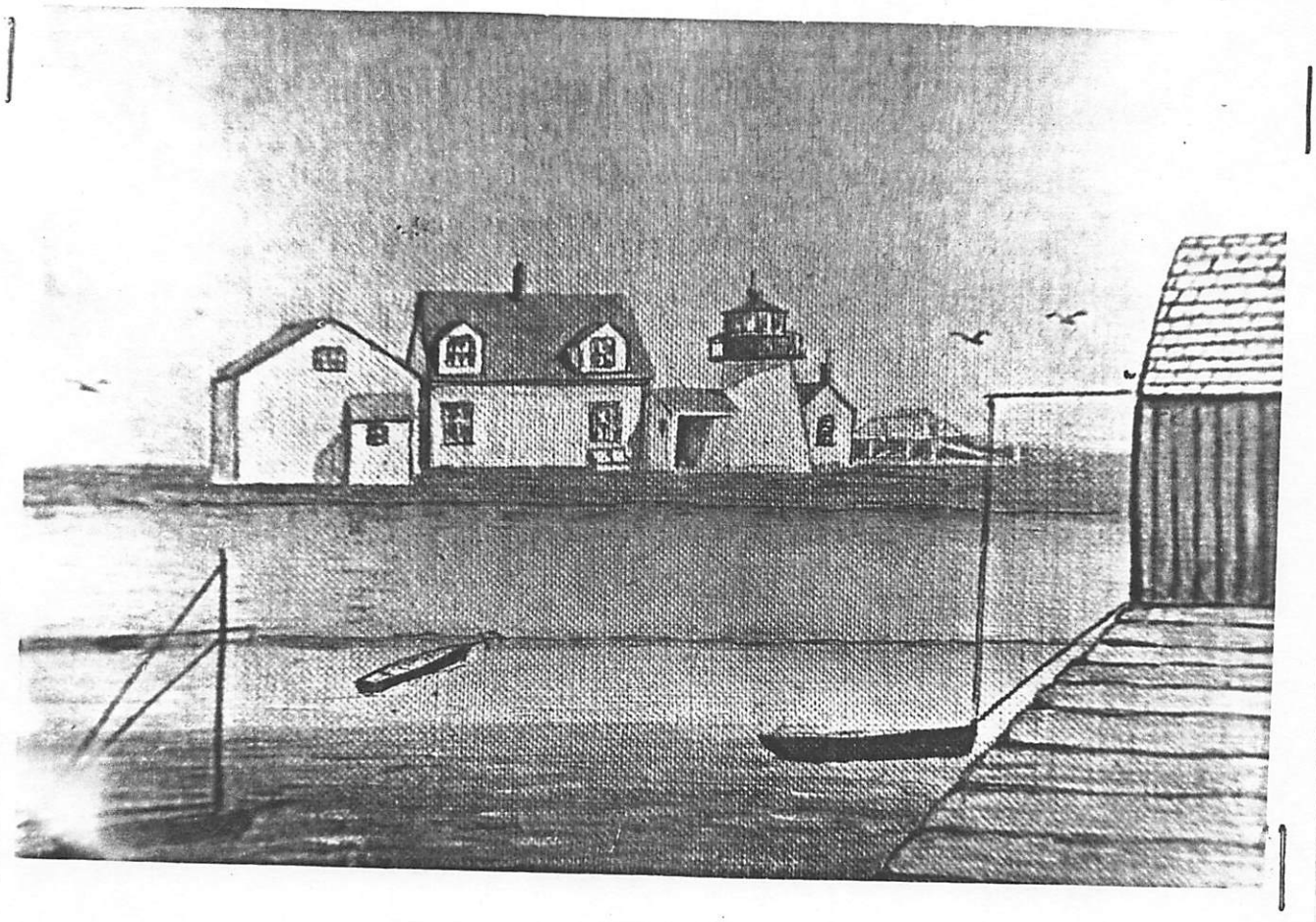
Mr. Chester Murray, Hyannis resident. Interview: October 28, 1965.

Rear Admiral Thompson, U.S.M.S. Interview: October 28, 1965.

Mr. George Walsh, President of the Historical Society of Hyannis. Interview: October 13, 1965.



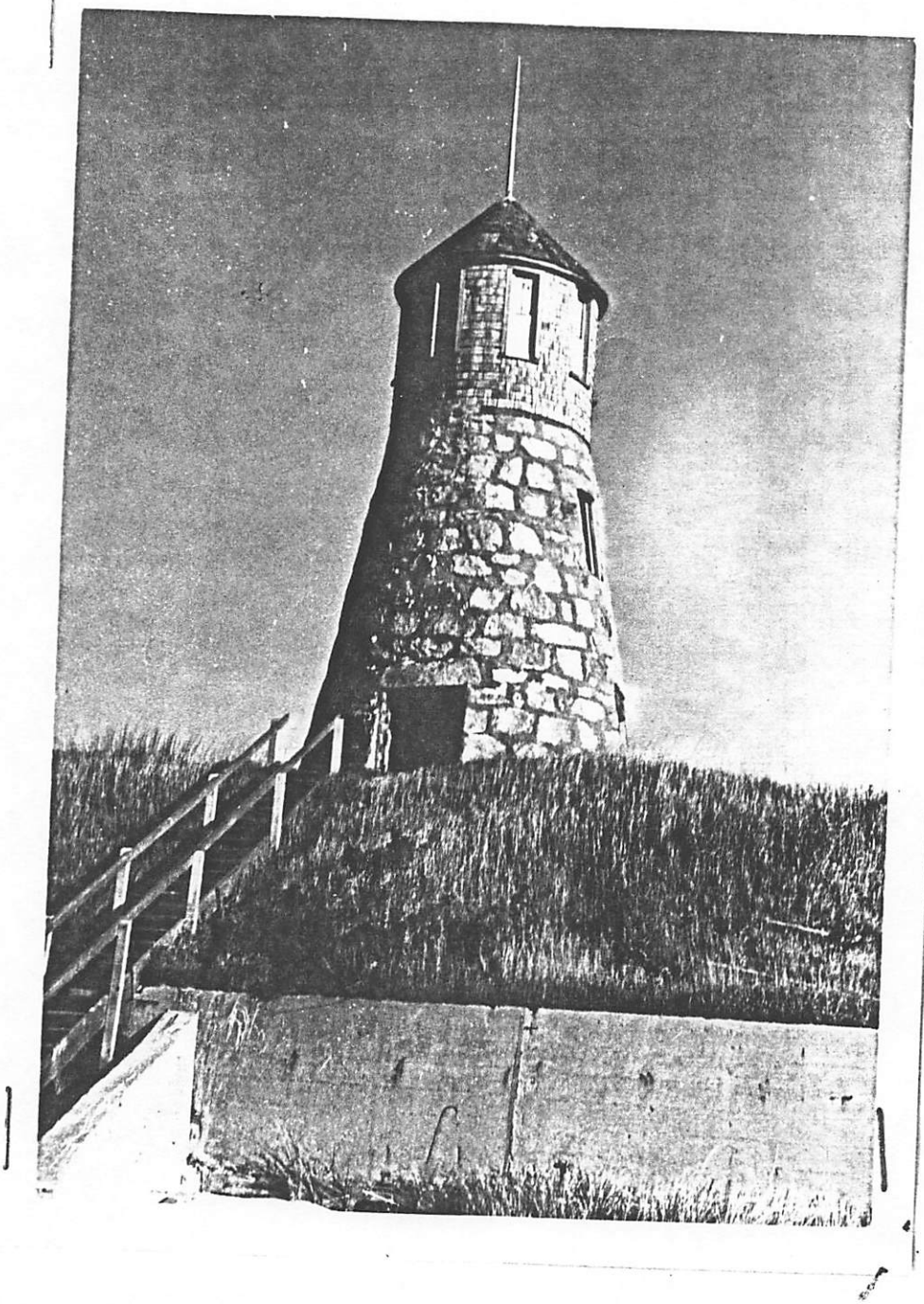
South Hyannis Light
Painted by George Walsh



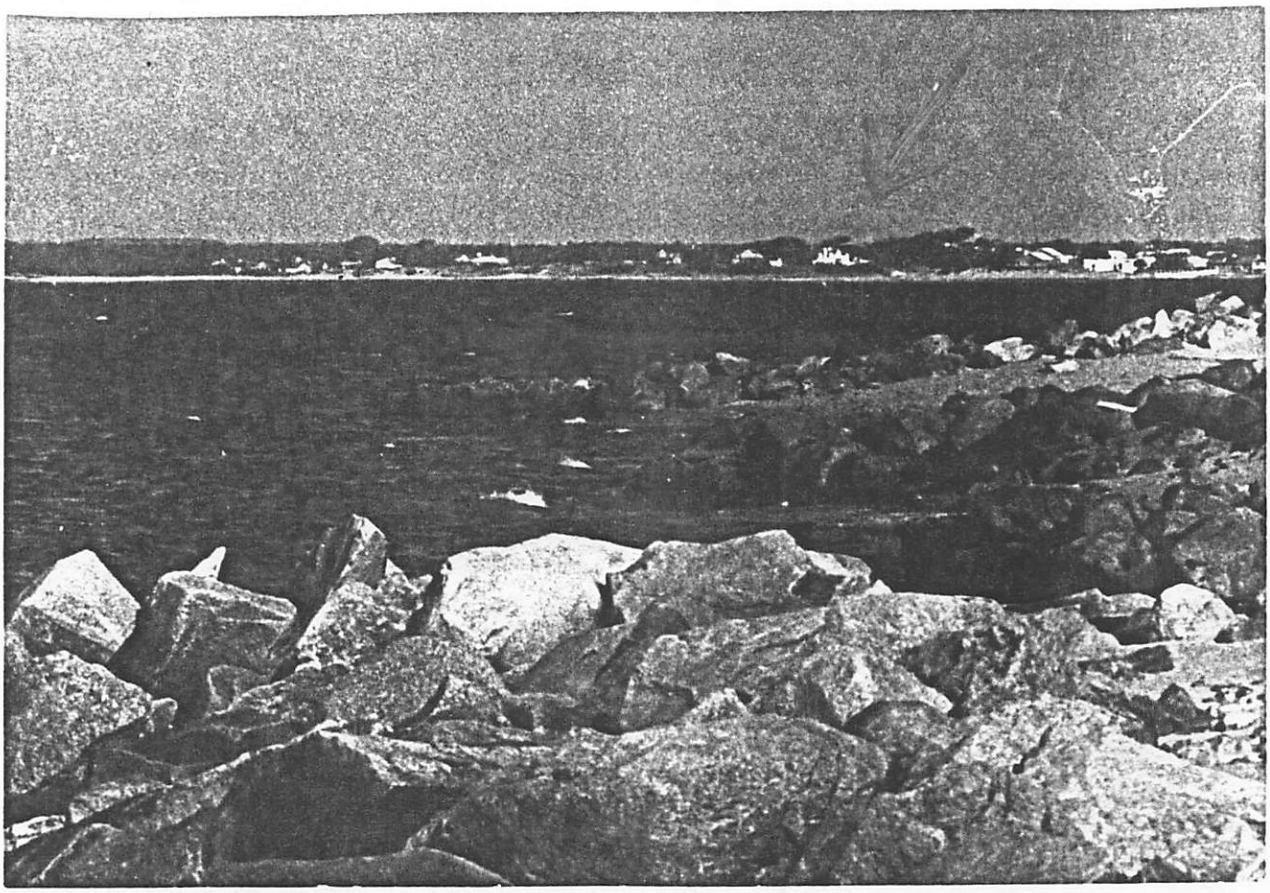
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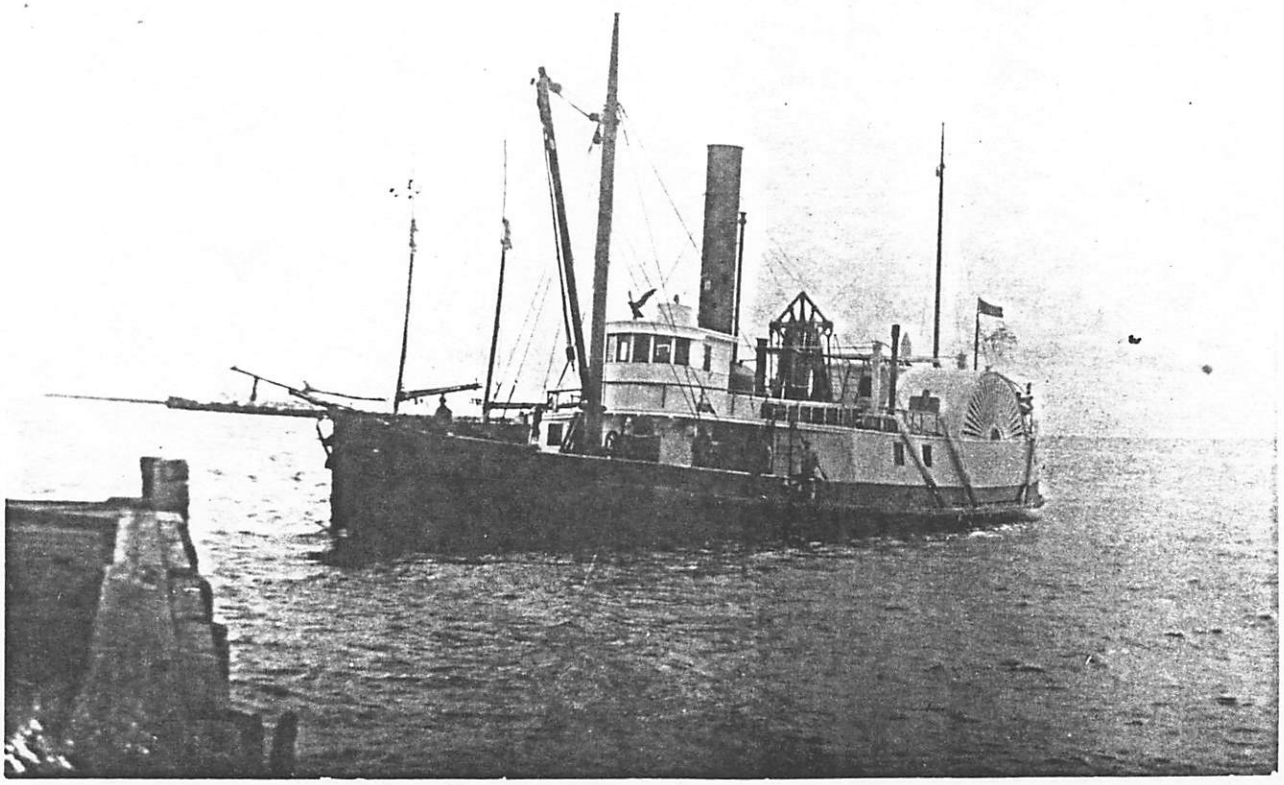
South Hyannis Light 1890



Point Gammon Light



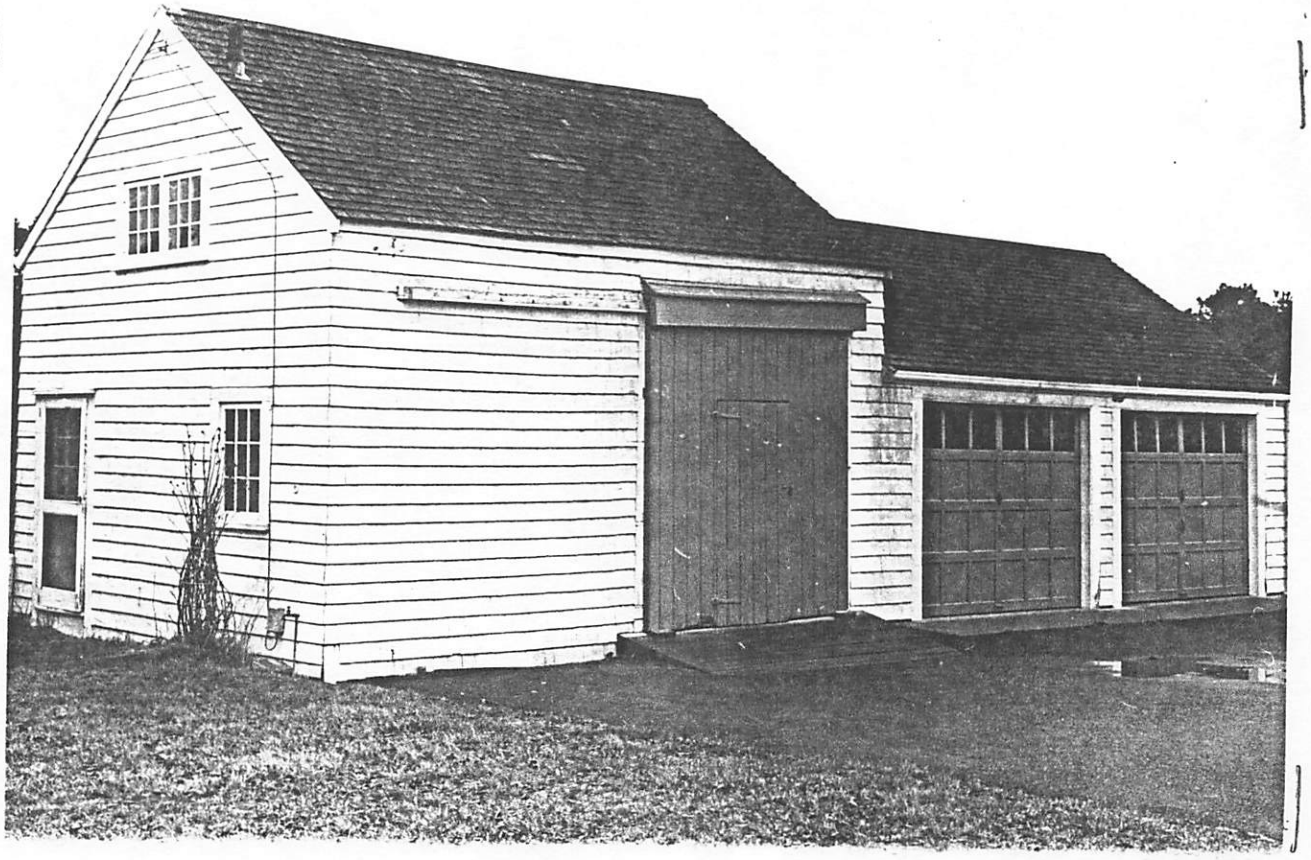
South Hyannis Light as seen from Point Gammon



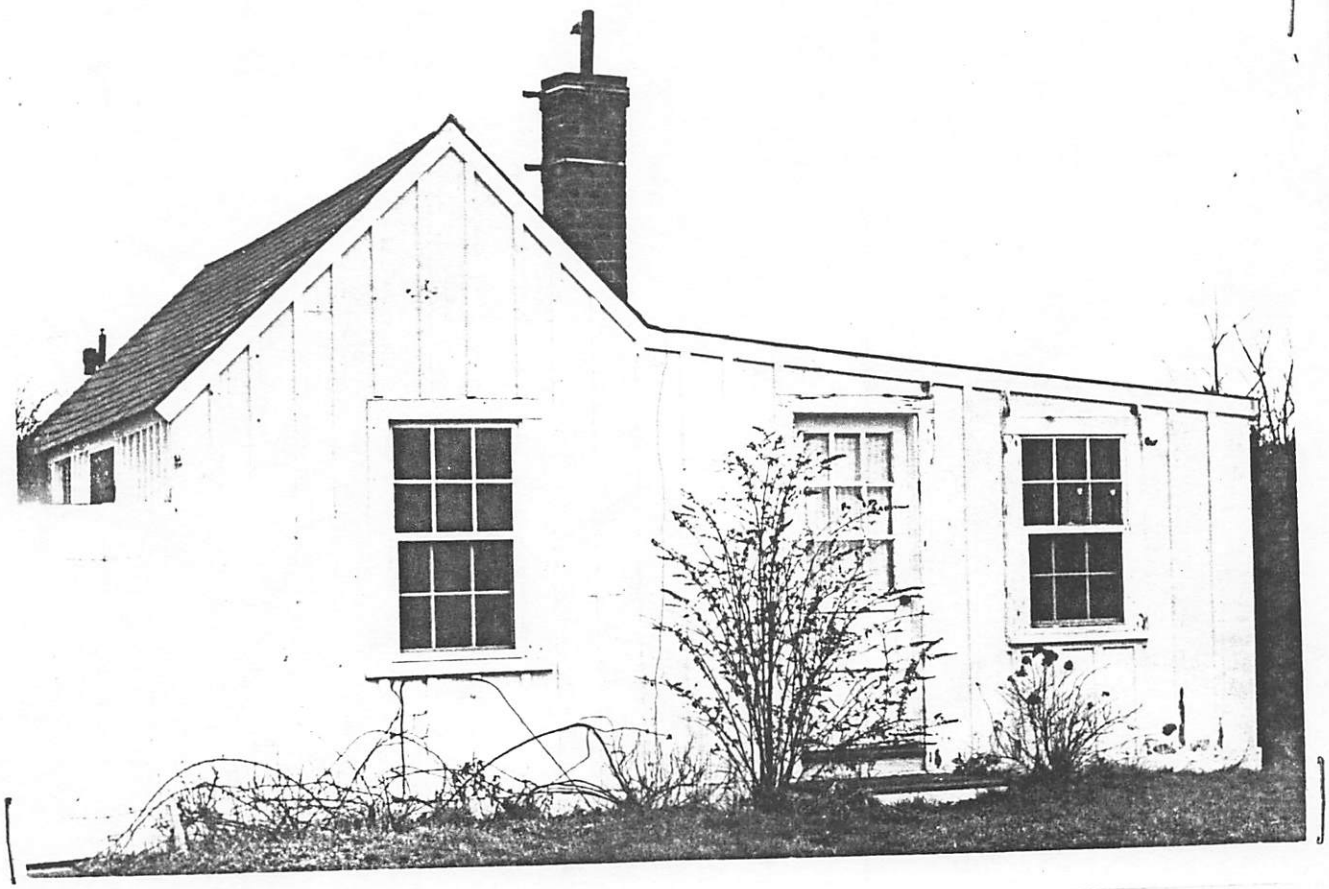
The Verbena



South Hyannis Light 1965



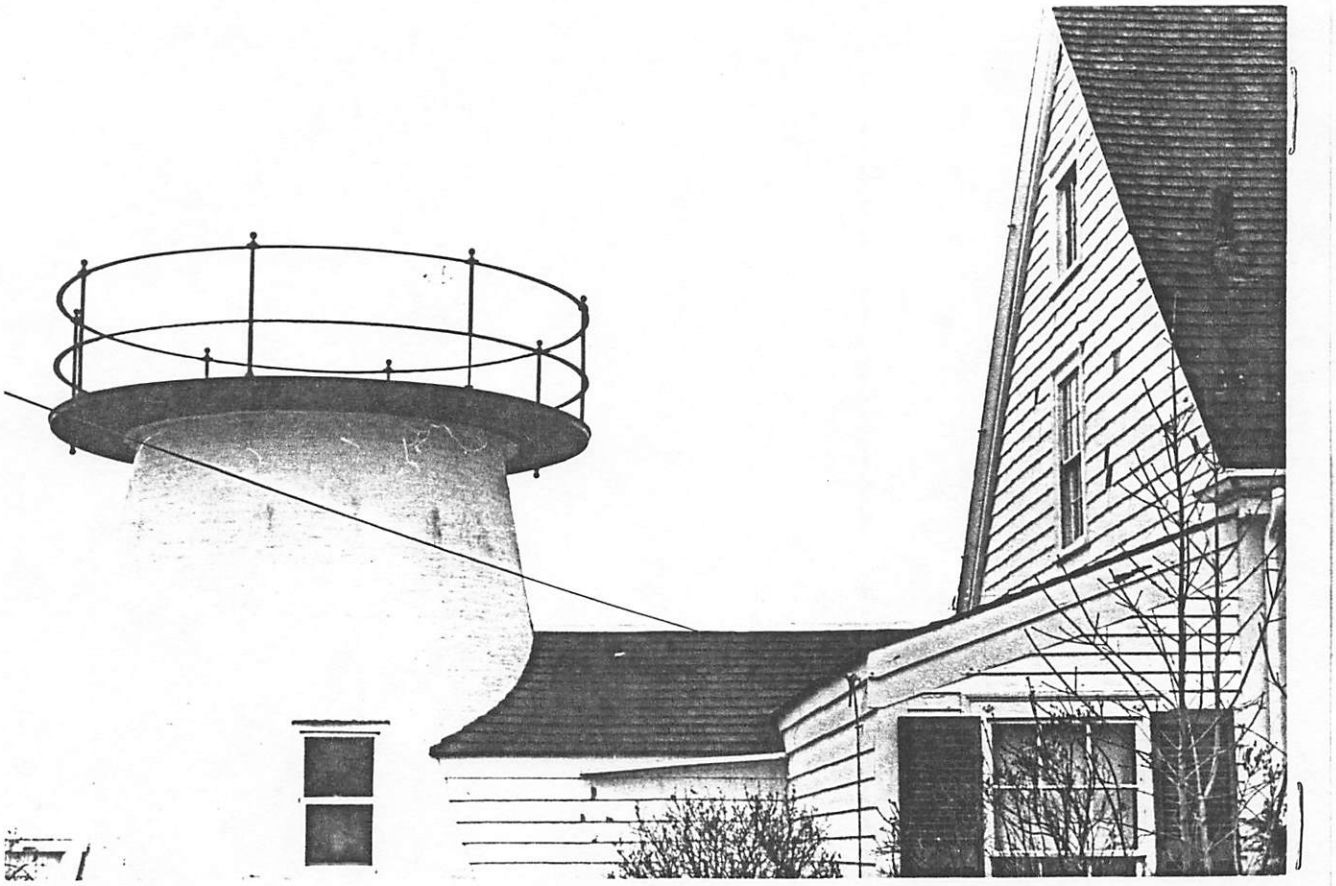
The barn



The cook house



The oil shed



Capt. Peak's bedroom window

