Battle Ground of Four Nations

Castine Historical Society Newsletter

Vol. 1, No. 3 P.O. Box 238, Castine, Maine 04421 April 1986

Dice's Head Lighthouse

By Elizabeth Duff

"In the month of June 1828, I went to New York...I returned and made interest to get the appointment as keeper of a lighthouse then building on Dice's Head, near Castine, which appointment I obtained, and am now in possession as keeper of said light..." So recorded Jacob Sherburne in "The Principal Incidents in the Life and Adventures of Captain Jacob Sherburne" written by "himself." At the age of 75, Sherburne, one-time ship's master, undoubtedly put the finishing touches on his autobiography while serving as the first keeper of Dice's Head Lighthouse.

The settlers along the east coast of the United States were quick to realize the need for lighthouses. Ships carrying supplies, trade goods and new settlers needed guidance in order to make safe landfalls. Lighthouses were not new to colonists from the British Isles. England began guiding ships approaching her coast early in the seventeenth century. The first English lighthouse, Eddystone Light off Plymouth, burned candles, unaided by reflectors or optical contrivances and cast a dim glow out to sea.



Courtesy of Castine Historical Society Collection from a photo owned by Roy Bowden

Dice's Head Lighthouse taken in the late 1880s when it looked as Dr. Wheeler described it. Note the bell at the top of the ladder.

Tour de Cardanan Light, on Isle of May, at the entrance to the Firth of Forth in Scotland, utilized wood fagots blazing in an open chauffer. This was later changed to an open coal fire. Such open lights were far from efficient. The wood fires smoked; coal fires were lost in storms. They had to be kindled on the leeward side and this was not the direction in which they were needed most. But the major problems with these early lights were uncertainty and lack of a penetrating beam.

Then, in 1788, the Fresnel lens was invented by a Frenchman, Augustin Fresnel. Not long after Thomas Stevenson, father of poet Robert Louis Stevenson, constructed his holophotal prisms. This provided total or internal reflections within the glass, instead of reflections from metal mirrors. These two inventions made it possible to use lamps fueled by oil. The oil used seemed to depend on which was most abundant and least expensive; choices included vegetable oil, whale oil, lard and kerosene.

It was during President Andrew Jackson's first term of office that the growth of shipping on the Penobscot River and Castine harbor made expedient the placement of a lighthouse at the end of a peninsula that commands the eastern side of the Penobscot River and marks the entrance to the harbor. Six years after the original light was completed, Captain Henry D. Hunter of the United States revenue Cutter *Jackson* inspected it. "This light," he reported, "should be located on the northern head of Holbrook Island at the eastern entrance to Castine Harbor. It would then answer as a guide up the Penobscot River and a harbor light." Regardless of Hunter's suggestion, in 1858, ever increasing shipping activity prompted President James Buchanan to order the original structure remodeled.

Castine historian, Dr. George A. Wheeler, describes

Dice's Head Lighthouse as "...a stone tower sheathed with wood and painted white, attached to a dwelling of wood, one story and a half. The light is fixed white, visible at a distance of seventeen nautical miles. The height of the tower from the base to the focal plane is forty-two feet. The height of the light above the level of the sea is 130 feet. The compass range of visibility is east by north, by eastward to north. The lens apparatus is of the fourth order."

The "order" Dr. Wheeler refers to is the light classification. A light of the first order produces the most powerful beam; the sixth order is the weakest. The distance between the center of the light and the lens determines the light's intensity. The shorter the distance from the light to lens the less powerful are the rays of light produced.

Robert T. Sterling, author of "Lighthouses of the Maine Coast" classified Dice's Head Lighthouse among bay and harbor lights. As such, its history is uneventful when compared to many of Maine's seacoast lights. Shipwrecks and heroic rescues performed by lighthouse keepers, their families and even their dogs have no part in the stories surrounding Dice's Head Lighthouse. About the only mystery is centered in its name. It is located on land originally owned by a family named Dyce. Yet Jacob Sherburne, in his 1829 autobiography, refers to it as Dice's Head. Sterling calls it Dice Head Light.

Beatrice Spurling, whose father, Captain E.T. Spurling, was keeper of Dice's Head Light was interviewed by Francis W. Hatch Sr., a long-time summer resident of Castine. The interview was printed in the *Ellsworth American* on December 19, 1974. Hatch wanted to know about growing up in a lighthouse family.

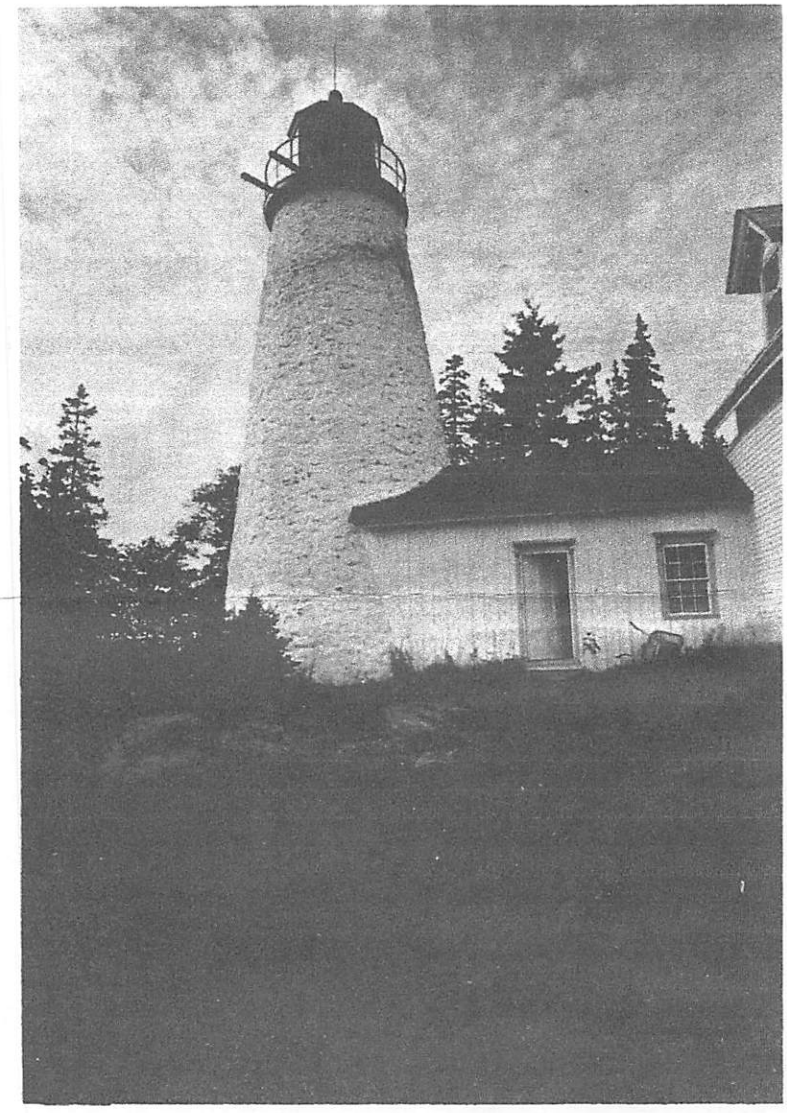
"Our first post was up on Avery Rock near Machias," Bea told him. "I was only three weeks old when my father was give the post. Avery Rock had no vegetation whatsoever. There were heavy shutters on all the windows. In a gale, at high tide, the seas would wash right over the rock. But we always felt safe and snug inside with every confidence in Father, whose calm always made us feel safe. Once, in a storm, the people in Bucks Harbor (not to be confused with Buck Harbor on the Reach) could see nothing but white foam over the rock. They thought everything had been washed away. But the house and outbuildings were bolted down and didn't budge."

Francis Hatch asked Bea how schooling was managed at isolated lighthouses. "Mother took care of that with books sent out from schools on the shore. By the time we had moved to another station on Franklin's Island, the books came from the town of St. George. We sat around the dining room table. Mother planned our lessons and we all kepy busy with the older kids helping with the younger," Bea explained.

According to Bea, the government boat brought barrels of salt port, corned beef, dried beans and sugar. There were visits from the Seacoast Mission's boats *Morning Star* and *Sunbeam*. "They brought us Sunday school supplies, gifts and books. Father's pay was $75 a month, but it must have been adequate," she said.

The move to Dice's Head Lighthouse brought about an amazing new life for Bea, her sister and brothers. "We could go to an organized school for the first time and play with other children. Summer life on Dice's Head was a new world for us. There were ladies with parasols, men in white flannels, buckboards to take them on quiet drives

(Continued on fifth page)



Courtesy of Leila B. Da

Dice's Head Lighthouse as it looks today.

Sources:

"Lighthouses of the Maine Coast," by Robert T. Serling; published by Stephen Day Press, Brattleboro, Vt., 1935.

"Narrative of the Principal Incidents in the Life and Adventures of Capt. Jacob Sherburne," written by Himself; printed at the Eastern American Press by B.F. Bond, 1829. (copy at Witherle Library, Castine)

"History of Castine, The Battle Line of Four Nations," by George A. Wheeler, M.D.; published by Burr & Robinson, Bangor, Me., 1975.

"The Lighthouses of New England," by Edward Rowe Snow; published by Dodd, Mead & Co., New York.

"Fond Memories of Christmas in the Castine Lighthouse," by Francis W. Hatch; published in "The Elsworth American," December 19, 1974.

"Historically Famous Lighthouses CG-232"; published by Department of Transportation, U.S. Coast Guard, Public Information Div., Washington, D.C., 20590.

(Continued from second page)

through Witherle Woods and lots of chances for us to make pin money. I had a summer job at the 'Dome of the Rocks' (hotel) at 50 cents a day. And I could make extra money by going to the houses and helping out. I'll never forget scrubbing bathtubs for 10 cents a ring."

After 19 years in the Castine lighthouse, Captain Spurling retired. In 1921, Bea joined the Frederic Wardwell Real Estate Agency in Castine. She's retired now, but is still out and about daily, picking up her mail at the post office or lunching at Petty's Pizza. The Historical Society counts on Bea to match familiar faces in misty, old photos, with forgotten names.

Francis Hatch ended his interview with this quatrain dedicated to Bea entitled "Lighthouse Children."

Few there are left whose childhood
faced the storms
That nature in a fit of anger hurled.
Where love of family was the rule of life
and family life the limits of the world.

Dice's Head Light warned first sailing ships and later steamboats away from treacherous rocks, guiding them into Castine's safe harbor or into the Penobscot River. In 1935, the light in the tower was extinguished, replaced by a light and a bell buoy on the rocks below. The land and buildings, except for 100 square feet surrounding the light tower, was deeded to the Town of Castine in September of 1935 by the Lighthouse Service of the United States. The light tower and the remaining 100 square feet came to the town in Decmber of 1956.

1860 maps of Castine available to book committee members

Paul Cyr, co-chairman of the Society's book committee, recently completed a map of the Castine On-Neck area showing houses and buildings that existed prior to 1860. The map is designed to guide committee members in gathering information on old homes and buildings. Questionnaires to be filled in by committee members and home owners have also been completed and are available at the Town office or from Paul Cyr. Paul is presently working on a second map which will include the Off-Neck area.

The committee plans to include the information in a book dealing with historic homes and buildings in Castine.

Society experts to present 'information please' program

All are invited to try to stump the experts or get the answers to questions dealing with Castine history at the Society's May 20 meeting. The CHS panel will be made up of Phil Perkins, Gardiner Gregory, Bea Spurling and Margaret Hall.

Plans for this meeting include inviting Adams School students in grades five through eight.

Off-Neck area slated for national historic recognition

When the Maine Historic Preservation Commission meets in April 1986, its members will be asked to put their stamp of approval on a new historic district in Castine before sending it on to Washington, D.C., for final listing.

According to Commission Director Earle G. Shettleworth Jr., there is the potential for an historic district and one individual property to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The district would begin in the area of the British Cana at Hatch's Cove and continue along both sides of Route 166 up to and including the Power-Webber Cemetery at the corner of the Old Ferry Road. The individual property which is eligible for nomination is the Thatcher Avery House owned by James Reed and located farther north on the east side of Route 166.

The eligible properties are significant as an unusual surviving group of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century farmhouses which represent a critical period in Castine's development. Moreover, the rural landscape remains largely unspoiled from the road down to the Bagaduce River. The houses, combined with the landscape, retain the ambiance of an early nineteenth century Maine farming community which thrived due to its proximity to both the river and the port of Castine.

The Thatcher Avery House which has been determined individually eligible is thought to be the oldest house in the area. Built in the 1760s, the house was originally a farmer's residence which underwent at least two major enlargements.

