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# The Story of Gurnet Light and of the Rescue of Bug Light

by

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From the earliest times man has had a dread of the sea. Even though, as biologists tell us, he came from the sea and his blood temperature indicates the age when he did so, his fear of the sea has remained. The Bible refers to the sea as the Great Deep, and ancient maps portray the regions beyond the then known land as the haven of fierce monsters. In fact, the only accounts of the sea in the Bible are of its turbulence and threat to human beings. Could this be attributed to the fact that the Hebrews were a landlocked people? Unlike their contemporaries, the Greeks and the Phoenicians, the Hebrews always regarded bodies of water as threats to human life. Their seafaring contemporaries braved the fearful waves and while still respectful of its dangers, moved early to make it serve mankind. This is a tribute to their efforts both in the building of ships and the erecting of guides to navigation we have always called lighthouses. The construction and maintenance of these directional beacons tells us a story of courage and skill and ingenuity that boggles the mind.

I have always wanted to write a story like this to pinpoint the privilege Duxbury sailors have enjoyed under the joint protection of Gurnet and Bug Lights, and this essay was triggered by my discovery in researching the records of Captain Parker Hall: that his father was the keeper of Gurnet Light during the 1880's and furthermore, that he had initiated lifesaving and other rescue operations during his tenure at Gurnet. And knowing that this latter service has been terminated (only Scituate and Sandwich have rescue facilities now), I wondered about the beginning of Gurnet and especially about the recent rescue of Bug, hence this essay.

To go back a bit--in fact, quite a bit--the first lighthouses were towers erected by Libyans and Cushites on the Mediterranean shore in lower Egypt. These consisted of fires kept lighted to aid primitive mariners as they sailed the then only known sea in the western world. The most famous of these towers was built in the reign of Ptolemy II on the island of Pharos at the entrance of the harbor to Alexandria in Egypt, and is known to us as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. (*Clipper* readers will know them as I did not and had to rely on my Latin scholar friend Connie Pye: the Colossus at Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Mausoleum of Harlicanassus and the Temple of Zeus at Olympia in Greece). The date of this lighthouse was 250 B.C. It was reported by ancients to have been 600 feet high, but later historians dispute this fact stating that this would render impractical the carrying of wood logs, and later coal, to fire the light. Romans also built lighthouses--one at Ostia at the entrance of the Tiber, another at Revenna and then one on each side of the English Channel at Dover in England and Boulogne in France.



These and other lighthouses were called "Pharos" after the uniquely constructed one off Alexandria. One was erected near Pisa in 1154, another at Messina and one at Leghorn in 1304. Probably the first one erected by the English was in 1636 at Eddystone. This structure standing on a rock ledge in the Cornwall coast in the midst of a storm with a 50-foot wave tearing at its sides is a feature in every story of lighthouses. The first American lighthouse was erected in 1716 on Brewster Island in Boston Harbor. Two other early ones were built at the entrance of Newport Harbor in Rhode Island in 1740 and off Nantucket in 1754. The threatened demolition of the latter brought the same protest from Nantucket citizens that met the announcement of similar plans for Bug Light four years ago, but this is to anticipate.

Gurnet Light was first built in 1768. A report of the history of the Light appeared in *The Duxbury Clipper* of May 29, 1986, as follows: "The beacon light at Gurnet Head was authorized for construction by the Massachusetts legislature on February 17, 1768. The lighthouse was built the following year. This lighthouse figured to a small extent in the Revolution that occurred a few years after the station was built. The lighthouse was ceded to the Federal government in 1790 and the first lights (twin lights) were exhibited from a single building in 1793. The lighthouse burned down on the evening of July 2, 1801, and it was 1803 before it was replaced. The new station showed two fixed white lights 70 feet above the water. A government inspection in 1838 reported dissatisfaction with the setup and recommended that the twin lights be set further apart. Accordingly, in 1843 the Gurnet Light was rebuilt. The structures were distinctive, their two octagonal towers having a more distinguished appearance. In 1924 the northeast tower of Gurnet Light was discontinued,

completing a period of 156 years when the twin lights had been characteristic of the Gurnet (as they still appear on the seal of Duxbury)."

Ethel Hathaway, a classmate of mine at Partridge Academy and wife of the late John Hathaway, spent many summers in the Gurnet, her family owning property there. She recalls vividlytiming the family schedule according to the passing of the New York to Boston boat, and the friendly rivalry between the twin light attendants to see who could get the brilliant kerosene fire light flaming first. I owe many thanks to her for the use of the accompanying postcard photos.

Some time in the late 1880's lifesaving, with its complement of men and equipment, was added to the task of warning mariners, and this opened up a whole new ballgame. I recall such stations at Brant Rock and Manomet as well as Gurnet. Then, in November 1939 the lighthouse service merged with the Coast Guard. Gurnet's light became a revolving one with a "red alert" section and was raised to 800,000 candlepower. I am indebted to my nephew, Richard Krueger, a Coast Guardsman for 28 years, for this and other details, especially the changing role of lighthouses.

Richard remembers the strenuous training in lifesaving techniques, in manning the 22-foot-long lapstreaked, double-ended dory and in setting up a "breeches buoy" operation. He recalled one blizzard in which a freighter ran aground on the rocks off Manomet and, despite the gale force winds, rescued in this way everyone on board the ship. He also recalled the task of managing Bug Light, where two men from the Gurnet crew would spend 14 days on-duty on Bug and 7 days off. At first the men would row a dory to Plymouth for



supplies, and when outboard motors came into general use, placed one of them on the dory's stern transom. They then raised it on davits and hung it there between uses. I remember seeing it often. Coast Guard tenders came periodically in those days with basic supplies like kerosene for the light. We sort of took Bug Light for granted as part of the seascape, and the Coast Guard maintained it, having given up the rescue operation in 1955 in a unilateral act that upset most of the citizens around Kingston and Duxbury Bays and Plymouth Harbor.

The response to this deprivation was nothing compared with the firestorm that greeted the announcement that the Bug was to be demolished, to be replaced by a white fiberglass automatic beacon. Unlike the response to the dropping of the lifesaving station, this time the Coast Guard had hit a nerve and people around the Bug reacted as one man to what they considered wanton destruction; they found that monkeying with Bug Light was equivalent to suggesting replacing Plymouth Rock with Styrofoam. Somewhat surprised also were good people of Kingston, Duxbury and Plymouth with the reaction of their friends. Few realized the power that lay under the kindly surface of their fellow citizens who rose in their wrath as one man, raising $25,000 to $30,000 and enlisting the ingenuity of a skilled engineer. A dedicated harbormaster, one man who never knew the meaning of the word "can't" and Duxbury people ably assisted by those from Kingston and Plymouth, saved the Bug for us.

To give credit where credit is due, once the Coast Guard officials saw the firestorm they had kindled, they were ready to make some compromises. After all, the Bug was constructed only in 1871, they reasoned, so how could it be rated a

historic landmark? Besides, complaints had been received that the light was too weak and needed increased candlepower that the fiberglass tower would provide. And they conceded early on that the Bug could stay; that was the bone of contention. So Edwin Heap and his wife, Peggy, and Earl and Miriam McMahon with many others took the bull by the horns: formed a non-profit corporation called "Project Bug Light". Don Muirhead fired up the Duxbury yachtsmen; Alberta Kirkpatrick, whose organizational skills are a legend in town, coordinated sales of T-shirts, bumper stickers, and glass cup plates forged for the occasion; and literally hundreds of supporters from Plymouth and Kingston as well as Duxbury joined the effort. And behind everything was *The Duxbury Clipper* whose intrepid editor fanned the flames of the effort whenever he saw them beginning to cool down.

The agreement was that the Coast Guard would reset the concrete foundation and remain responsible for the light which had been their responsibility since 1871. Then they would leave the Bug to this new corporation for five years on the condition that they refurbish the superstructure. So this is what they did, rewelding all the ironwork rusted over the years (the whole is built of cast iron), replacing the catwalk with treated wood, chipping, scraping, sanding, priming and painting the entire superstructure. It was a tremendous task working in these hazardous conditions with menacing waves, tide rips, whirlpools constantly threatening them. What a task and how much we all owe these daring people! I talked to Ed Heap about it and he said, "Yes, it sure was tough; the first thing I did as I began work was to increase my liability insurance. I think most of us did." All Duxbury, Plymouth and Kingston and all seafaring folk who enter and leave Duxbury Bay are deeply in debt to these good folks who acted



firmly to preserve one of this area's most significant landmarks.

So we have now sketched the history of one of man's great achievements in taming the sea to serve his needs. Beginning with the birth of civilization itself, this particular effort has been dramatic and harrowing at times. Converting the sea from enemy to friend has been a great accomplishment and still remains a challenge.

Today, if your Pearson or Triton should lose its mast in a squall and you send out an SOS from the middle of Cape Cod Bay, no Coast Guard dory with its complement of 10 hardy seamen will row to your rescue. Instead you'll be hailed from a helicopter, and a 300-horsepower launch will come over from Scituate or Sandwich and throw you a line, all the while keeping communication by radio so you'll be brought safely home. And the work goes on as in the old days, with greater and greater technology to assist the safe passage of the seas; but the bravery of those valiant sailors is repeated today in the stories of rescue that catch our eye in the newspapers or on television.