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The Dukes County Historical Society was founded in 1922 to preserve the history of Dukes County for the public benefit. It is a nonprofit institution, supported by membership dues, contributions and bequests, which are tax deductible. Its annual meeting is held in August in Edgartown.

It maintains two historic houses, both providing guided tours to the public during the summer, one in Edgartown and the other in Vineyard Haven. A nominal fee is charged to non-members.

In Edgartown, the Thomas Thomas Cooke House, circa 1765, is on the corner of School and Cooke Streets. Acquired by the Society in 1935, it is maintained as a museum of Island history.

Also on the Society grounds in Edgartown are the Francis Foster Museum and Gale Huntington Library. Both are open to the public year round. The Museum has an exhibition of the Vineyard's maritime heritage. The Library contains logs, journals, genealogies and other Island documents, plus many photographs and volumes of history.

The Edgartown property also includes the Gay Head Lighthouse exhibit with its 1854 Fresnel lens and the Carriage Shed containing various old boats and wagons, including an 1854 hand pumper fire engine. These, too, are open to the public all year.

In Vineyard Haven, the Society maintains the Jirah Luce House, circa 1804, formerly operated by the Tisbury Museum, now part of the Dukes County Historical Society. The exhibits are of early Vineyard explorers and settlers, with emphasis on the maritime history of Holmes Hole, as Vineyard Haven was once called.

The public is invited to visit the Society and also to take out a membership, which includes a subscription to this quarterly journal and free admission to our buildings.

Family Tragedy at Cape Poge Light

by JOHN A. HOWLAND

CAPE POGE Light was built in 1802, the second lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard. John Adams, the country's second President, signed the order authorizing a light on the northern tip of Chappaquiddick Island. It was more of a navigation aid to Nantucket mariners than Vineyarders.

Even today a keeper and family would find it a remote place in which to live year round. Although it is within easy sight of Edgartown, the shire town of the county, before four-wheel-drive vehicles it could be as much as a full day's trip to town and back. And on a frigid day in winter, the lonely walk along the wind-swept beach could be dangerous.

Its remoteness brought human problems. One such, in July 1899, contributed to a tragedy that eventually broke up the family of the keeper.

The lighthouse keeper was George E. Dolby, who in August 1898 was transferred from West Chop Light, where he had been assistant keeper. He was, the transfer order read, "promoted and appointed keeper of the Cape Poge Light-Station, Massachusetts, with compensation at the rate of five hundred and sixty dollars per annum, from September 1, 1898, vice Mr. George H. Fisher, resigned." The order was signed by Secretary of the Treasury Lyman J. Gage.

Keeper Dolby, born on a farm in Norton in 1853, apparently had little taste for agriculture and had joined the Lighthouse Service in 1882. Advancing up the ranks from acting 2nd assistant keeper at Cape Cod Light to

JOHN A. HOWLAND lives off Lambert's Cove Road, West Tisbury, a quiet retreat far different from the world he inhabited as Director of Advertising for A. T. & T. He keeps his talents alive by digging out such undiscovered nuggets of Vineyard history as this.

assistant keeper at West Chop in 1885, he now was getting his first command as Cape Poge's eleventh keeper.

In 1892, while at West Chop, he had married Mabel Jane Laidlaw, a spunky Scottish lass twenty years younger than he. She had emigrated, as an orphan, to America at the age of five. By the time George was assigned to Cape Poge, they had three sons.

At best, lighthouse keeping was a lonely, sometimes dangerous occupation, although certain stations, West Chop being one, were close enough to town to make a social life possible. In contrast, Cape Poge Light was as isolated as though it stood on a rocky island off the coast of Maine.

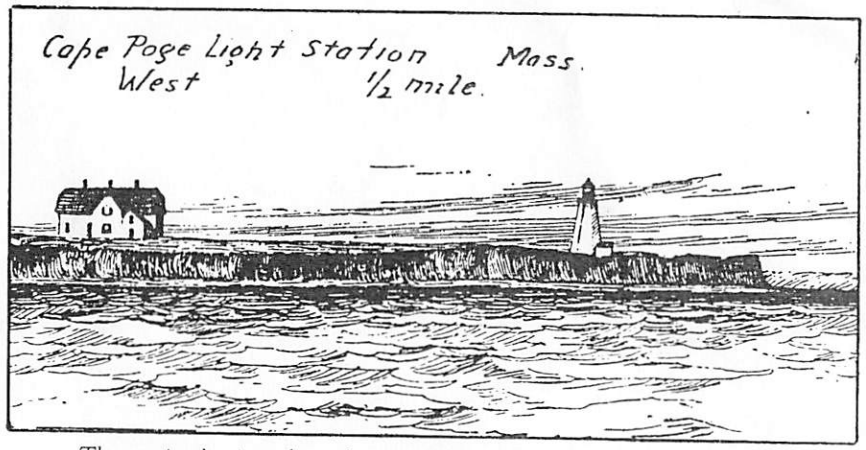
How Mabel Jane accepted her husband's promotion and new station can only be imagined. It was no promotion for her, moving to that remote spot, she certainly must have thought.

But she went and it was there, on Cape Poge, soon after they moved, that tragedy occurred and the family revolt began.

On September 1, 1898, George E. Dolby made this entry in the lighthouse journal: "Having all Government Property on this day turned over to me by the late Keeper Geo. H. Fisher, I now take charge of this station." It was his first command, and he was a proud man. The next morning at 8 a.m. he left for Edgartown, as he wrote in the journal: "Keeper absent from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. for family supplies and mail matter."

That was the way of life on Cape Poge. Once a week, less often in winter, the Keeper spent the day going to Edgartown to pick up supplies and mail, leaving Mabel Jane alone with the children. As far as can be learned from the journal, she rarely left the station that first year.

But they had company of a kind that winter. On November 1, four workmen and a large quantity of lumber and other building materials were brought to the station by the lighthouse supply vessel. The men apparently moved



From *List of Lights*, 1892.

The mariner's view, from the east, of isolated Cape Poge Light in 1892, a few years before the Dolby family moved in.

into the house as roomers, being fed and housed by Mabel Jane. They had come to build a new oil shed, a wood shed, and to make some improvements in the dwelling. When a violent storm destroyed the station's boathouse while they were there, they were ordered to build a replacement. Altogether, they were there three months, by which time Mabel Jane must have been happy to have them leave.

The late November storm that blew down the boathouse was a big one. Keeper Dolby, who like most keepers was a poor speller, described its effect on the station:

> November 27, Heavy East to N.East Gale, raine and Snow. Bank washing badly. Fences blown down. Boat House Blown down and carried away. Lost one pare of Oars, two double blocks and Fall which belonged with Blocks used for Hauling up Boat, mast, gaft and boom which belonged with old Boat all stowed in Boat House. Stepes moved from Tower. Tower rocked very Badly. A three-masted Schurner is ashore Betwene Cape Poge and Edgartown, very heavy Sea on the East Side of Cape Poge.

Watching the cliff in front of the house being washed away, Mabel Jane, the young Scottish emigrant, doubtless wondered why she had ever decided to marry a lighthouse keeper.

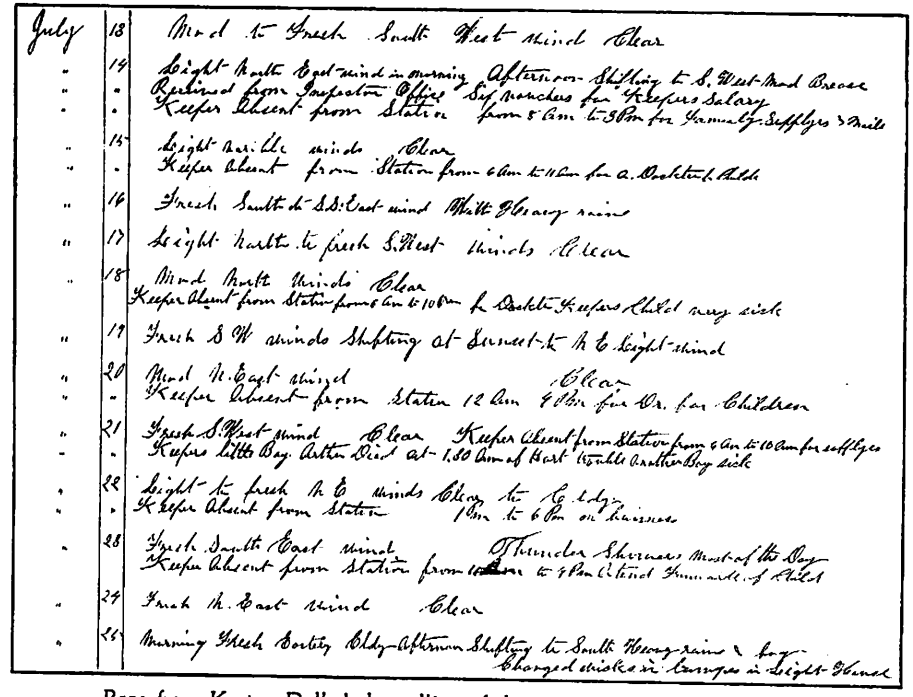
February 1899 brought another gale from the northeast, the powerful waves washing away more of the bank atop which the dwelling stood. Then it turned extremely cold and as Keeper Dolby wrote: "Cannot see any watter from the west side of Cape Poge Pond to Edgartown. All ice. Steamboat had hard time getting through the ice." Three days later, another blow drove three schooners up on the shoals just off the point, one being dismasted. "Lots of ice in the Sound," wrote Dolby.

But they made it through the winter. When spring came, it brought with it another problem. Their well ran dry. In June, the U.S. Steamer *Azalea*, supply vessel for the Lighthouse Service, delivered "one Kitchen Rainge, 180 gallorns of watter and four watter butts." Clearly, the well had run dry; water had to be brought in.

Solving the well problem wasn't quick. It wasn't until two weeks later, that, as we learn from the journal, "Mr. Chadwick of Edgartown at work Driving a well in Keepers Dwelling. Have got 14 feet 6 inches of watter in Pipe. Broak Cuppling on Box. Left Station, pump uncomplete." On June 30, after four more dry days, Mr. Chadwick returned and finished putting in the pump. Finally, Mabel Jane had the hand pump in her kitchen working: "Capacity 4 buckets per minute."

July 1899 started pleasantly enough. Warm and dry, only an occasional morning fog spoiled the loveliness of Cape Poge. Mabel Jane may have decided that perhaps being a keeper's wife wasn't so bad after all.

Then on July 15, this ominous entry: "Keeper absent from Station from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. for a Dockter for Child." There is no hint that a doctor came back with him. Again, three days later, "Keeper Absent from Station from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. for Dockter. Keepers Child very sick." On July 20, two days later: "Keeper Absent from Station 12 a.m. to 4 p.m. for Dr. for Children." None of the three entries states that a doctor returned with Keeper Dolby to examine and treat the child. The next day, he again left the station,



Page from Keeper Dolby's log telling of that tragic week in July 1899.

this time he was gone from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. "for supplyes."

That night, the family tragedy occurred. Here is Keeper Dolby's official journal entry:

> Keepers little Boy Arther Died at 1:30 a.m. of Hart trouble, another Boy sick."

July 22, Dolby again went to Edgartown from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., leaving Mabel Jane with her three children, one dead and another sick. He explained only that he went "on business." No doubt the business was arranging for Arthur's funeral which took place the following day: "Keeper Absent from Station from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Atend Funeraile of Child."

Blaming the isolation of Cape Poge and Lighthouse Service life generally for her loss, Mabel Jane, apparently unbeknownst to her husband, fired off a letter to the lighthouse establishment. She requested, or quite probably

demanded, a change of station. There is no copy of what she wrote, but it was enough to get the Chief of the Lighthouse Service to reply directly to her, not to Keeper Dolby. The Chief suggested that by some shuffling of assignments, the safer, less isolated Edgartown Harbor Light might become open in the future. He closed by writing: "You see I want to accommodate all I possibly can."

Just what George thought of his wife's independent action is not known, but it is clear, in a later letter to Keeper Dolby, that the Inspector of the 2nd District of the Lighthouse Service in Boston knew he was coping with a determined and formidable lady whose Caledonian blood was up. He wrote Dolby: "I have heard from Mrs. Dolby and I presume you are or *soon will be* of the same opinion" (author's italics).

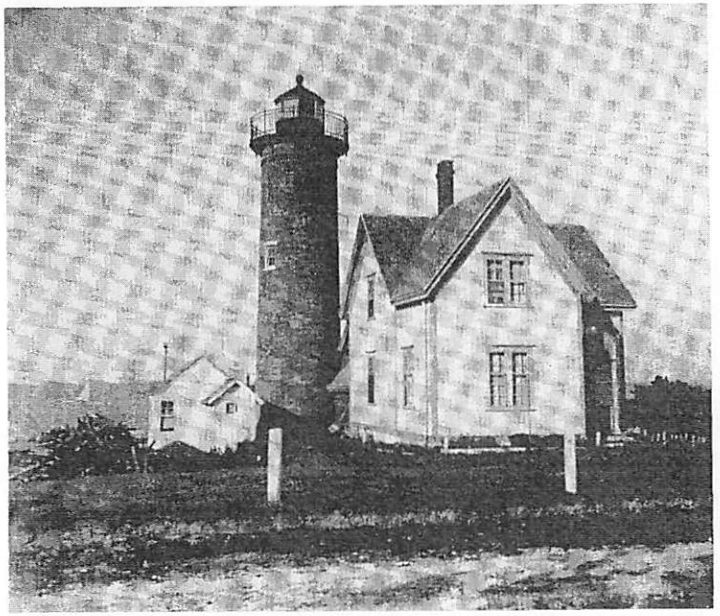
Unfortunately, the Edgartown Light opening did not work out and Dolby was shortly thereafter offered the keepership of the Cliff Light, Nantucket.

It was then that Mabel Jane's revolt reached the impasse, both with the Lighthouse Service and with George: family concerns versus career demands, Gaelic determination versus Yankee obduracy. She adamantly refused to stay at Cape Poge and equally adamantly refused to go to what she considered the equally isolated Nantucket Light.

She and her two surviving children had spent the winter after Arthur's death in Edgartown. Cape Poge in winter was too much for her. She returned to the lighthouse on June 6, 1902. The next day, in the customary terse style of lighthouse keepers, there is this entry in the journal: "Keeper packing up things. Getting ready to move."

Off to Nantucket went the dutiful Lighthouse Keeper George and off to a house in Vineyard Haven went Mabel Jane and the boys. And there the revolt of Mabel Jane continued for seven years.

George, after his duty on Nantucket and a short tour at Palmer Island, returned to the Vineyard as Keeper at West Chop in 1909. There, in a safe, non-isolated haven, Mabel



From *List of Lights*, 1892.

West Chop Light about 1892. The small ell on woodshed, left, is the privy. The brick tower, built in 1892, was painted white in 1899.

Jane and family rejoined him. But only for six years.

She had never really recovered from the loss of her child. The other two boys, now in their early teens, had left for jobs on the mainland. The memories associated with the Lighthouse Service, the reassociation with George and, it may be assumed, other family conflicts, led her to take a step fairly extraordinary for those days. Off she went to the divorce court and then off to the mainland where she took a position as matron of the State School for Retarded Children in Wrentham.

Mabel Jane retired in 1945 and always until her death in 1954, according to family recollections, recounted the story of the death of her "little Arthur." Her son brought her body back to the Island where she was buried beside her lost infant, Arthur, in the Edgartown Cemetery.

George retired in 1919 and lived with a son by a previous



George Dolby, in uniform, sitting outside a shop on Main Street, Vineyard Haven, probably about 1910, while Keeper at West Chop.



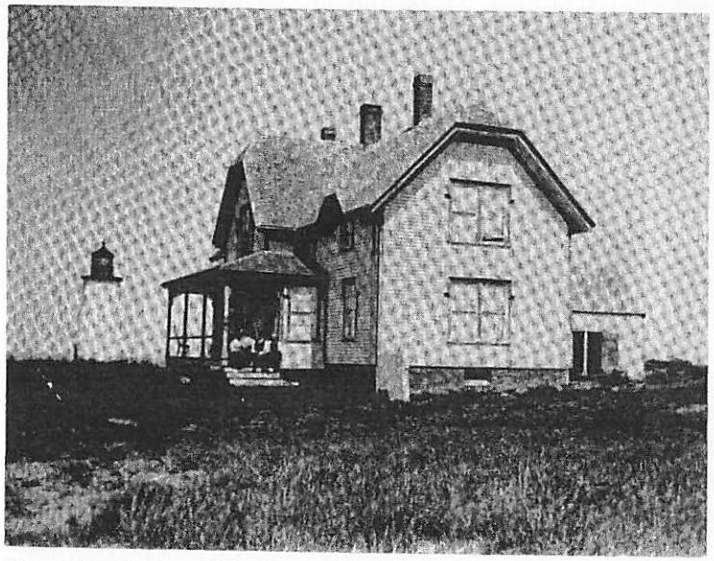
Mabel Jane Dolby, now Mrs. Alger, while a Wrentham school matron in 1935.

marriage, who was assistant keeper of Sankaty Light, Nantucket. After 27 years in the lighthouse service, his pension was $485.25 per year. He died in 1932 and is buried in the plot of his forebears in Barnstable.

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Cape Poge Light,* although moved back several times from an encroaching ocean, is still there on the remote, lonely cliff where Arthur Dolby, aged 3 years, 11 months

*For the complete history of Cape Poge Light see *Intelligencer*, v.25, nos.1,2,3.



Cape Poge Light and dwelling in the 1920s, still remote and isolated.

and 21 days, died with no doctor in attendance, his parents standing by helplessly.

But there will be no more such tragedies in its keeper's family. Today, it is unmanned, fully automated; no keeper, no family, not even a dwelling, remain. Only a beacon.

Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to George I. Dolby Jr., the third generation of the family on the Island, for allowing him to read family letters and documents and for sharing with him the sad events in the lives of his grandparents.

Customs Collectors at Edgartown

John Presbury Norton (1830-1842)

by FLORENCE KERN

JOHN PRESBURY NORTON of Lambert's Cove took office as Collector of Customs for the District of Edgartown in 1830 under strange circumstances. His predecessor, Squire Thomas Cooke Jr., could not believe he had been dismissed from the office he had held for 21 years under three presidents: Madison, Monroe and John Quincy Adams.

Cooke was sure he would be recommissioned even though he was a National-Republican and the new president, Andrew Jackson, a Jefferson-Democrat, was intent on ridding the government of Adams loyalists. It was the young nation's first experience with what soon was called the "spoils system" and the 63-year-old Cooke wasn't prepared for it.

When Jackson was elected, Cooke, eager to keep his post, asked various Edgartown associates to recommend him for reappointment. Many did, bombarding the Treasury Department with letters of remonstrance. Among those he fully expected to endorse him was his Deputy Collector, Jeremiah Pease, who had worked for him both in Customs and privately on his saltworks and farm.

But Pease refused to sign a letter of recommendation. Was he hoping for the appointment for himself? Perhaps. He was, after all, a Democrat who had supported Jackson, and his brother, Isaiah, the County Sheriff, must have had political connections. In any case, his refusal to sign the letter cost

FLORENCE KERN spends her summers on Chappaquiddick, interrupted by many hours in our library on the "big" Island. She has written extensively on the history of the United States Revenue Service, a subject which led to her great interest in Edgartown Customs Collectors. This is the fourth article in this important historical series.