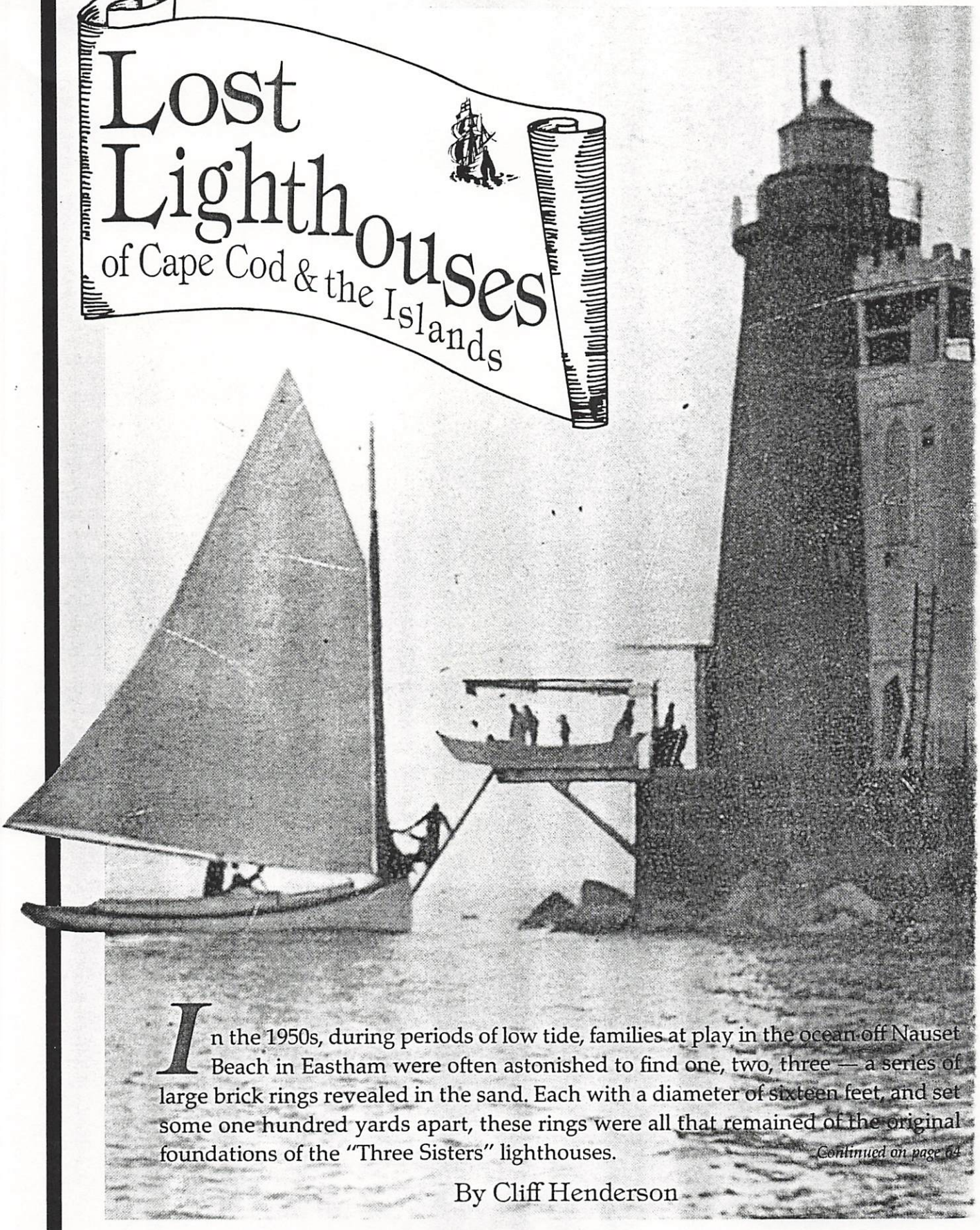
Lost Lighthouses of Cape Cod & the Islands



In the 1950s, during periods of low tide, families at play in the ocean off Nauset Beach in Eastham were often astonished to find one, two, three — a series of large brick rings revealed in the sand. Each with a diameter of sixteen feet, and set some one hundred yards apart, these rings were all that remained of the original foundations of the "Three Sisters" lighthouses.

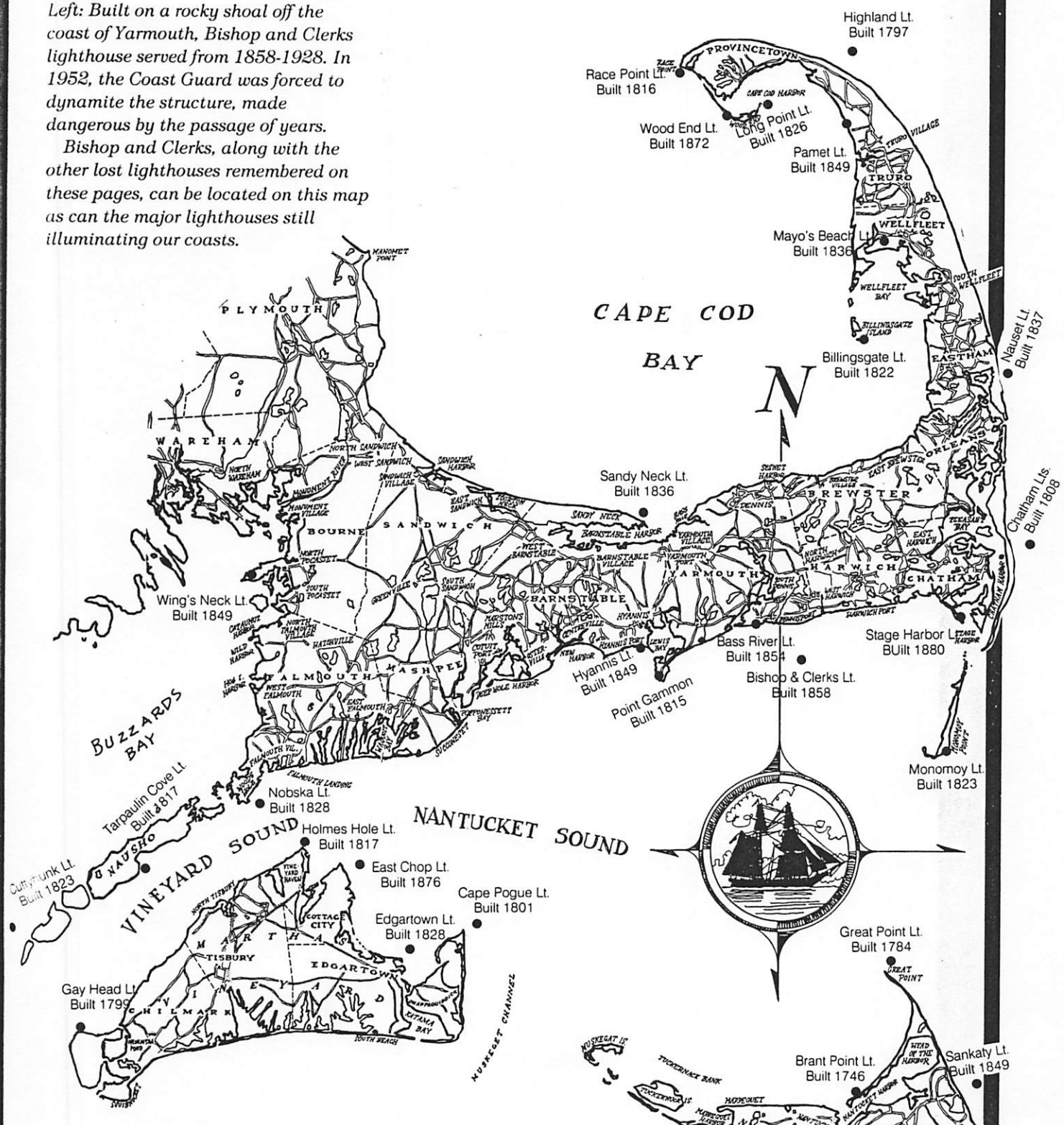
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By Cliff Henderson

Lighthouse Locations

Left: Built on a rocky shoal off the coast of Yarmouth, Bishop and Clerks lighthouse served from 1858-1928. In 1952, the Coast Guard was forced to dynamite the structure, made dangerous by the passage of years.

Bishop and Clerks, along with the other lost lighthouses remembered on these pages, can be located on this map as can the major lighthouses still illuminating our coasts.



Lost Lighthouses of Cape Cod & the Islands

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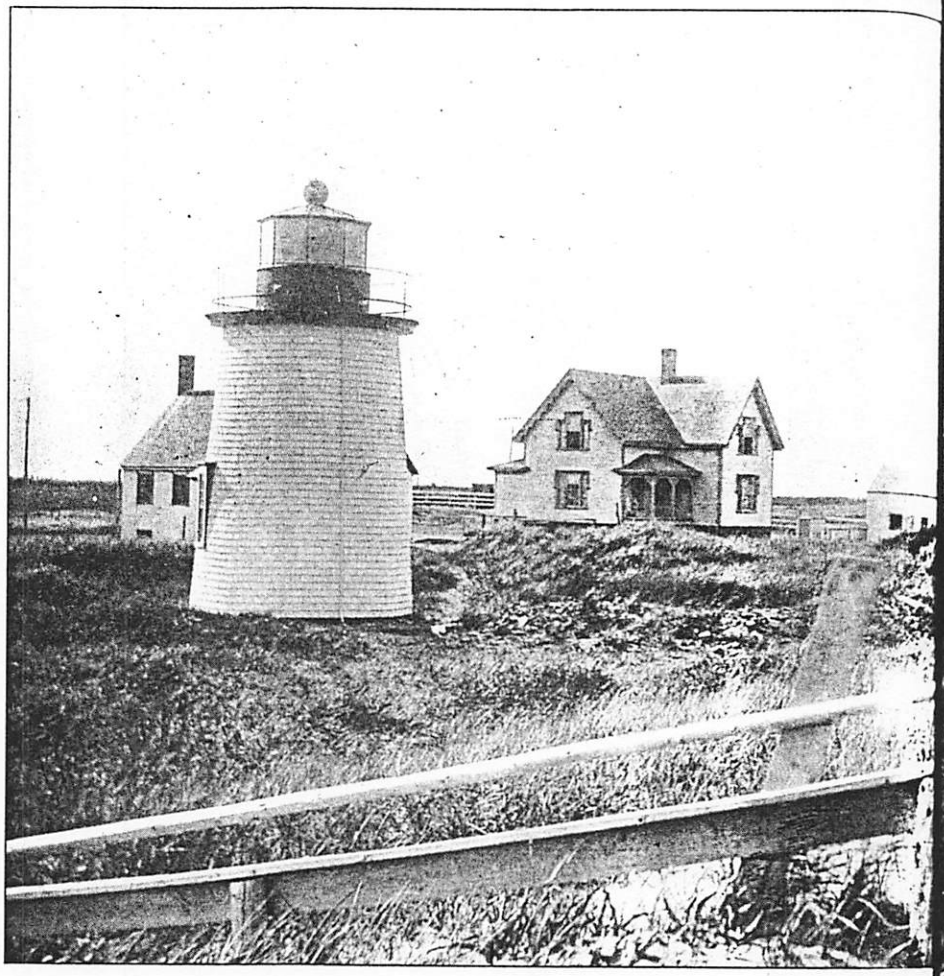


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Above: Thr of Eastham 1923 to pr

Below: Cha Eastham. T



Deemed a nineteenth-century folly, the Three Sisters, built in 1837, were said to be not only poorly constructed, but provided too many lights for one location. They were to be objects of constant repair and controversy within the Lighthouse Service, until they went into the surf in 1891.

Built all at one time, with the idea that this would distinguish them from what were then two lights at Chatham, the Three Sisters proved unpopular with almost everyone from the very beginning, especially the group that roamed the Nauset highlands on moonless nights, following an old horse with a lantern tied to his tail. These wreckers, or "Mooncussers" as they were then called, made their living luring mariners who were misled by their wandering light into running their ships aground. Mooncussing had become so profitable that it was said that several significant local fortunes had been founded by the dark of the moon.

In the life of a lighthouse, the all but inevitable end is that with constant erosion to its base, it will eventually tumble into the sea.

Three wooden movable towers replaced the Three Sisters and survived all complaint against them until 1918, when the two end towers were sold at auction, with the condition that they be moved within 10 days. At $3.50, Mrs. Helen M. Cummings of North Eastham was the highest bidder. The towers were moved to her summer cottage, where they remained private property until 1965, when, with the creation of the National Seashore, they were purchased from the Cummings family by the National Park Service. Recently they have been reunited with the center tower which after it was sold in 1923 to another cottage owner, was replaced by one of the "Chatham Twins," leaving but one light in Chatham. They now stand at a site off Cable Road in Eastham. There, they have been restored as national landmarks, and repositioned, one next to another, just as they once stood.

The 1800s were a period of great concern for the safety of men at sea. The hazards of navigation off the Outer Cape had resulted in hundreds of shipwrecks. The area became known as "the graveyard of the Atlantic." In response to what was seen as a dire threat to commerce, Congress acted, and, beginning in 1808, no less than twenty-four new lighthouse locations in and about the Cape and Islands were approved for construction.

Of these, many remain, that is —in one form or another. In the life of a lighthouse, the all but inevitable end is that with constant erosion to its base, it will eventually tumble into the sea. Almost all the lighthouses on the Cape today have either been rebuilt after being lost to the waves, or moved back before the ocean claimed them. None of the lighthouses at Chatham, Eastham, Truro, Provincetown, Nantucket, and the Vineyard stand at the sites where they were first built, and only a very few are the original structures — like Wood End and Long Point on the more sheltered bay side.

As more powerful beacons were

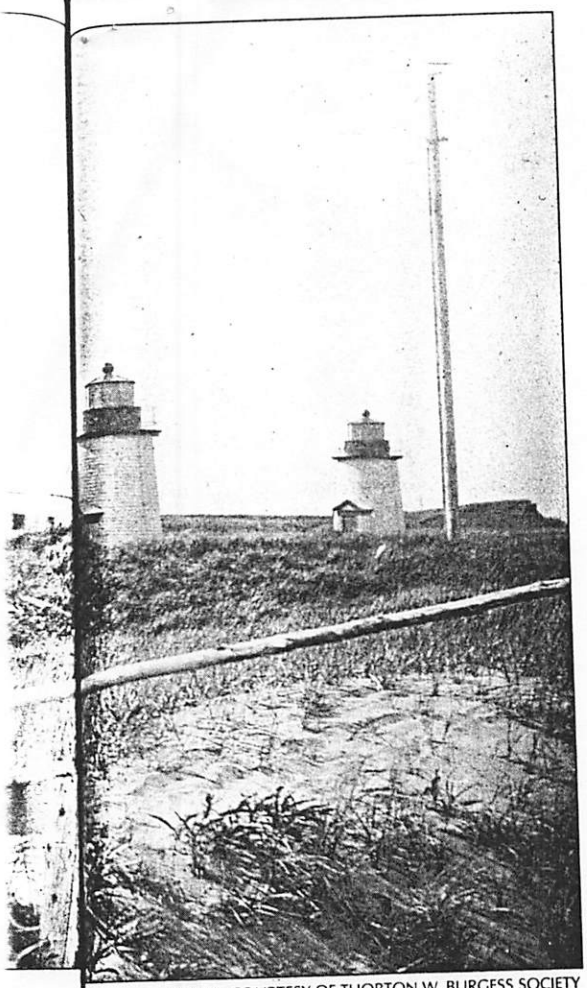


PHOTO COURTESY OF THORTON W. BURGESS SOCIETY

developed, and as certain lights became unnecessary or were deemed confusing to the mariner, many of the early lighthouses, once lost, were never replaced. So little is known of several of these that it appears to be impossible to recover either sketches or photos of them, even though lighthouses from their very inception were great favorites of artists and photographers. In the case of Pamet Light, for example, all that is known is that it was built in 1849 on the bay side at the mouth of the Pamet Harbor in Truro and discontinued after a few years because it was too easily confused with existing lights in the area.

Somewhat more is known of Mayo's Beach Light, which stood a few miles east of Pamet Light on the bay side, at the entrance to Wellfleet Harbor. Again, Mayo's Beach Light was a subject of controversy from its inception. As it was but six miles north by northeast of the then powerful light at Billingsgate, it was generally considered a needless expense. Discontinued in 1922, it is notable for having been the home of Sarah Atwood, the first woman lighthouse keeper in the history of the service, who served there from 1876 to 1891.

Like the Three Sisters, quite a few lighthouses eventually became private homes. The Point Gammon Light, built in 1815 at the southern tip of Great Island, Yarmouth (now a peninsula), has been, since 1972, the occasional summer home of Arnold Chace, whose great grandfather bought the entire 600 acre island in 1914. Called Point Gammon because seamen attempting passage between it and the light at Bishop and Clerks ledge were often "gammoned" (as in backgammon) or fooled by the unpredictable depths. The light served until 1858, when it was replaced by a lightship that had been moored off the nearby rocks three years earlier.

Perhaps the most visually dramatic of all lost Cape lighthouses was Bishop and Clerks, Point Gammon's neighbor in Nantucket Sound. This solitary tower, built in open water on a shoal of rocks two miles from land (and named for the large rock called "Bishop," and the smaller ones, called "Clerks"), was first lit in October of 1858. An imposing 65-foot gray granite conical tower on a gray granite cylindrical base, it served until 1928. For the next twenty-five years, it served as an attraction for visitors from all over the world. Unfortunately, over the years it became undermined by the relentless wash of the waves, and in 1952 the Coast Guard saw no recourse but to dynamite the by then dangerous structure.

In at least one case, that of Billingsgate Island Light, not only has the light itself vanished, but also the entire sixty acre island in Cape Cod Bay that was its base. Discovered in 1622 by men of the *Mayflower*, Billingsgate Island became a thriving community by 1822 of thirty homes, a school, and a works for extracting oil from the local blackfish (a species of small whale).

The island prospered, but there was no way for it to withstand the force, year after year, of the nor'easters that worked at washing it away. Forseeing their fate if they remained,

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Above: Three movable wooden towers replaced the controversial and ill-fated "Three Sisters" of Eastham, originally built in 1837. Though now restored to trio status, they were sold in 1923 to private hands, two of them going for $3.50 a pair!

Below: Chatham's "Twin Lights" before one joined the restored trio of "Three Sisters" in Eastham. The twin became a stand-in for a tower which remains in private hands.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THORTON W. BURGESS SOCIETY

Lost Lighthouses of Cape Cod & the Islands

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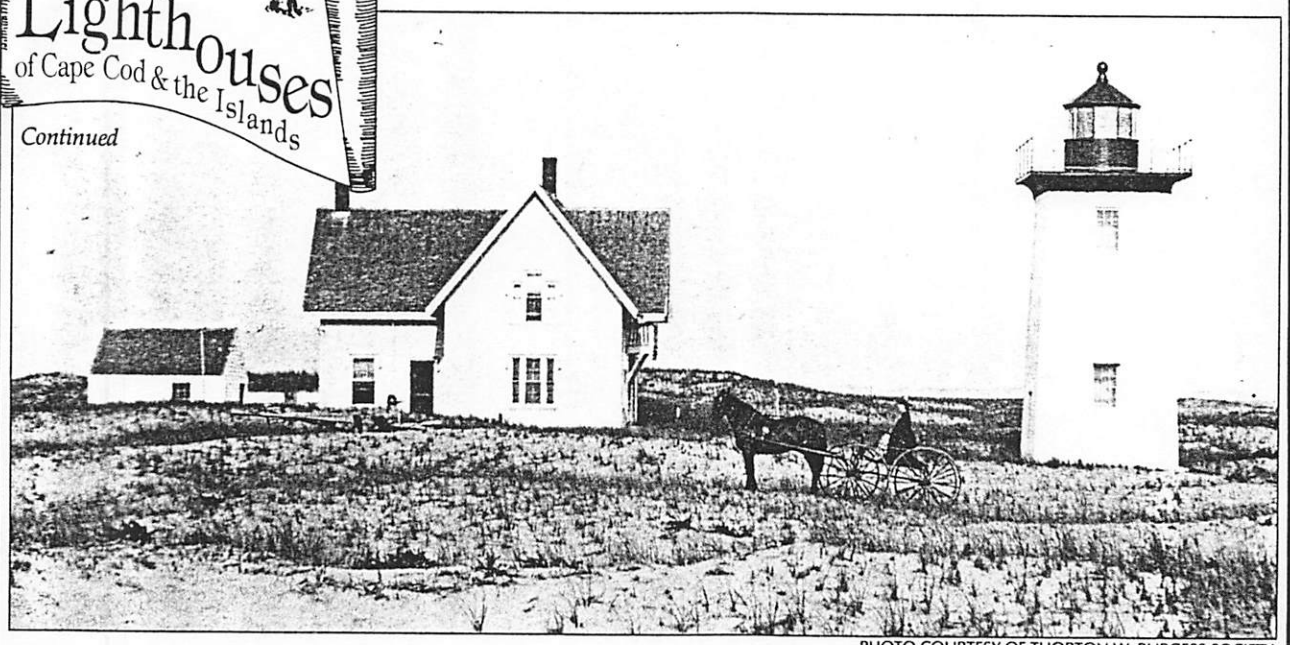


PHOTO COURTESY OF THORTON W. BURGESS SOCIETY

Wood End Light in Provincetown remains one of but a few lighthouses never rebuilt and never lost to the relentless pound of the surf.

most families fled by 1898. By 1915, the Billingsgate Island Light was awash and leaning; soon after it went into the surf. By 1942, the island had completely submerged. Today a lonely buoy in Wellfleet Harbor marks the site.

At Sandy Neck, from 1836 until 1952, a light held forth from the vantage of the barrier dunes at the entrance to Barnstable Harbor. Once an important East Coast port with heavy traffic in Boston-bound packets and fishing boats, Barnstable had its own customs house and was a center for shipbuilding as well. Here again the original light was washed into the sea. This was replaced by a brick tower that withstood the elements until it was disestablished in 1931. This stone tower remains, while the light itself was transferred to a steel skeleton tower close by, where it served until 1953. In 1954, Edward B. Hinckley of Barnstable bought the tower along with the keeper's house for $1,551.

At Stage Harbor, again the locale of a lively commercial traffic throughout the late 1800s, the youngest of the Outer Cape lights was built in 1880. During prohibition, the keeper of Stage Harbor Light (also called Harding's Beach light) was said to be heavily involved in smuggling, with, at any given time, a fortune in whiskey hidden under the floorboards of the passageway from the house to the tower. Today, only the tower of the original light remains, the light and lantern long gone, the tower capped.

At the other end of the Cape was Wing's Neck Light. Constructed in 1849, at the east side of Buzzard's Bay, at the entrance to the Cape Cod Canal, the original light stood as it was built until 1889, when, after extensive fire damage, it was for safety's sake revised from a light atop a dwelling to a separate tower attached to the house. It is unique among all remaining lights in the area in that it is the only intact wooden tower attached to a period keeper's house. Nearby are an 1849 stone oil house and an 1870's keeper's house. Both were floated to the site from Ned Point at Mattapoisett. Succeeded in 1945 by a steel tower with radar, Wing's Neck is now privately owned.

In 1849, funds were appropriated for a small harbor light at Hyannis, costs for the light ran to $2,000, for the dwelling $800, and for a small beacon to range with the main light $350. Reputed to be the smallest lighthouse on the entire coast, Hyannis Light stands thirty-two feet tall, and was active for 81 years, until 1930. Since then it has remained in private ownership, changing hands several times until acquired most recently by Alan Granby and Janice Hyland, noted dealers in marine antiques, who have lovingly restored the tower to its original splendor.

Those interested in the progress of values in lighthouses may find it instructive to compare costs of the original building to the costs of acquiring and renovating them — often running well into six figures. But then, for those with a taste for lighthouses, their lore and their history, there is no question but that their value is beyond price.



Contributor's Notes: *Cliff Henderson is a frequent contributor to* Cape Cod Life.