Lighthouse Keepers of the Past

The origin of The Cape Cod Five Cents Savings Bank dates back to 1855 and our start in Harwich Center, over 140 years ago, in an age when life saving facilities and lighthouses virtually dotted Cape Cod shorelines giving guidance and support to sailors at sea.

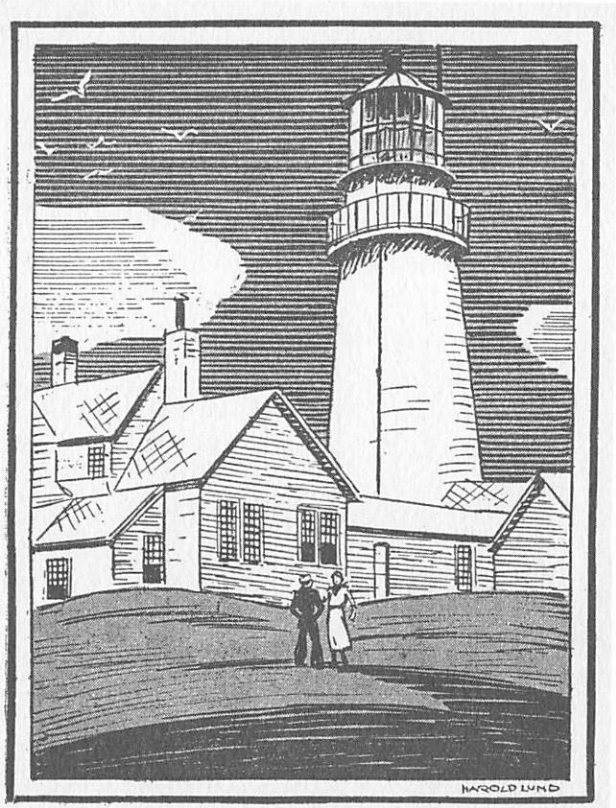
In last year's Annual Report, we offered a pictorial tribute to the U.S. Life Saving Service (later the Coast Guard) on Cape Cod - an historical view of its people and buildings.

In our 1995 Annual Report, we would like to round out this picture by saluting the men and women who operated many lighthouses here: from the very first sentinel erected in Truro back in 1797 (Highland, or Cape Cod Light) to the last one built in Chatham in 1880 (Harding's Beach, or Stage Harbor Light).

Emphasis in the next several pages will be on the people behind these lights - the lighthouse keepers - in addition to all the dates and details behind the lights themselves. In today's very visual world, we perhaps too often forget that human dimension, those rich anecedotes and compelling tales, the daily lives of folks running these beacons (that actually saw much more of the humdrum than heroics). Too frequently we dwell on facts about the bricks and mortar, or a pretty picture, rather than recalling what everyday life was really like "back in the good old days."

This Report, then, is dedicated to their history and the lighthouse legacy in both pictures and print that they left behind for all of us to share.

And, lest you think that the life of a lighthouse keeper was glamourous and romantic - as many would have you believe - you simply have to sample a little of the written record. Take, for example, a letter penned by Joseph Holbrook, the first keeper of Mayo's Beach Light in Wellfleet, dated September 23, 1842:



HIGHLAND LIGHT—TRURO
Cape Cod, Mass.

Postcard published by artist Harold Lund

We trust that you will find the next few pages informative and lively, coupled with a financial picture of where we are today on pages 16-22.

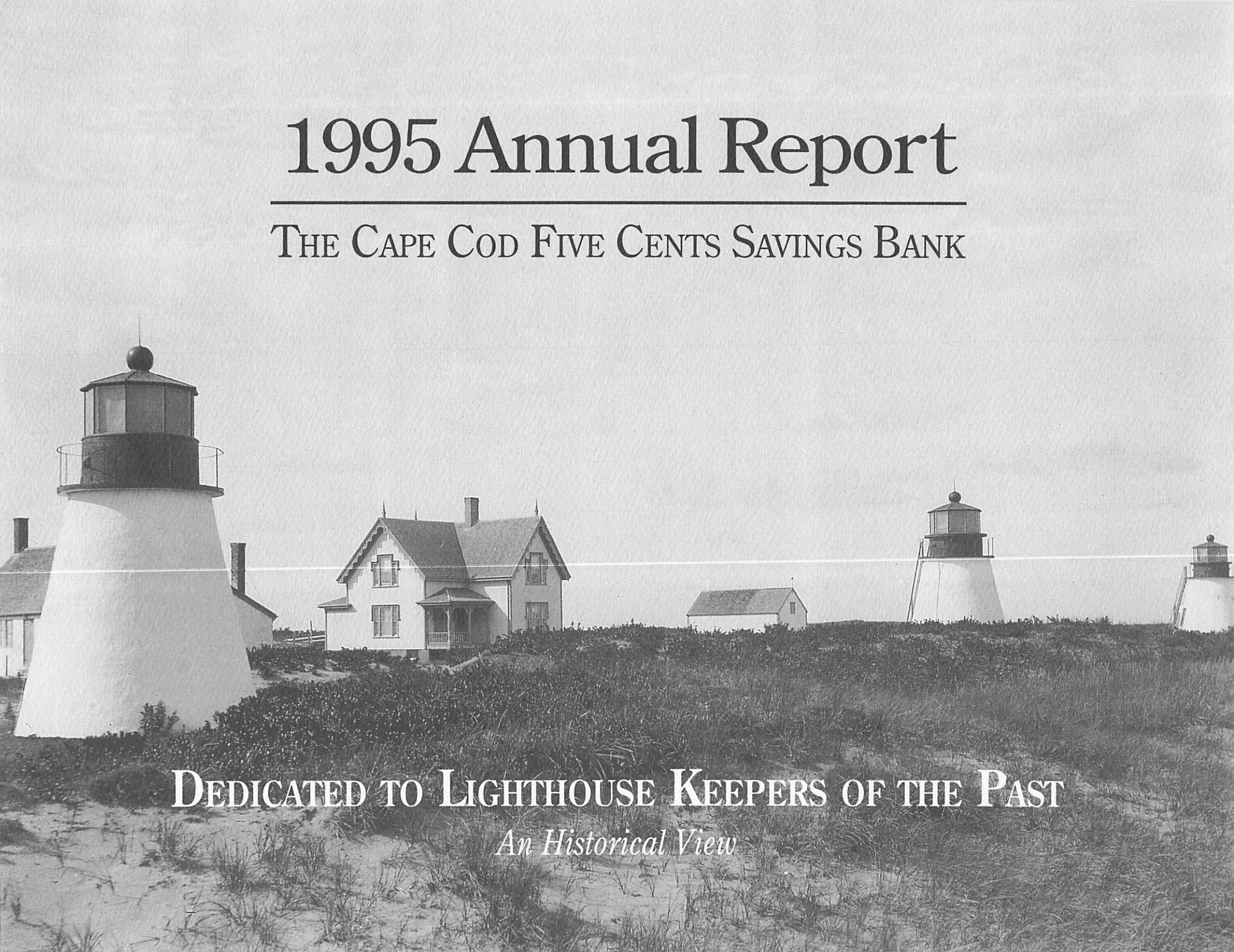
". . . The lighthouse is a brick building of four rooms, with the lantern erected upon the ridge or roof thereof, which is of wood. The walls of the house are set two feet below the natural surface of the beach, without any other foundation. In consequence of this the cellar was flooded with water continually; in fact the tide ebbed and flowed regularly in the cellar. The oil butts were placed in the cellar; & during a very high tide, in attempting to move them and save the oil, I received a serious injury by the falling of one of these butts (containing 93 gallons) upon me. The very wretched manner in which the house was built renders it almost uninhabitable; the walls always and the roof continually leaky. In consequence of this and being compelled to use the water caught from the roof, which constitutes my only resource, two of my children have died, as I solemnly protest, on account of that unhealthy condition of the house and using stagnant water of the cistern. When it blows hard the lantern on the roof rattles & shakes as to require my constant attention to keep the light from being shaken out, breaking the tube glasses and spilling the oil. The whole weight of the lantern and its rise above the roof cause numerous leaks therein, by the manner in which it is shaken by the wind . . . The reflectors and lamps are bad and yield but a poor light. I consider this lighthouse to have been erected in a very shameful manner & such as no honest man would have done . . . There is no well of water here of any kind, nor am I allowed any boat."

– Letter reprinted from George Worthylake's article on the Mayo's Beach Light in the Summer 1994 issue of "The Keeper's Log" *of the U.S. Lighthouse Society.*

COVER PHOTO: *The original "Three Sisters of Nauset" in North Eastham were built of bricks and mortar in 1838, about midway between the "Twin Lights" of Chatham and Highland (Cape Cod) Light in North Truro. Threatened by erosion, a second set of movable wooden lights replaced them in 1892. The photograph was taken by Orleans camera buff Henry K. Cummings in 1890.*

1995 Annual Report

The Cape Cod Five Cents Savings Bank



Dedicated to Lighthouse Keepers of the Past

An Historical View