Lost Lights of Cape Cod

Bishop and Clerks Lighthouse

1858 - 1919

By Betty Bugbee Cusack

Bishop and Clerks Ledge is about 3 miles south of Point Gammon and about nine miles southeast of Hyannis Mass.

In 1855 the Bishop and Clerks rocky ledge was a menace to navigation in spite of the nearby Point Gammon Lighthouse built in 1815 and the South Hyannis Light in 1849.

Among the shipwrecks listed here was the ship "Columbus," of Newburyport with Captain Balch enroute from Cadiz to Boston with a cargo of salt. It struck on Bishop and Clerks April 13, 1851, was pounded over and driven onto the beach at Cotuit. All hands were saved. The vessel and cargo valued at $20,000 brought in $180 at an auction.



Destruction of Bishop & Clerks Lighthouse in 1952.

So in 1855 a lightship was placed near the rocks. Proving impractical the lightship was superseded by a lighthouse on the north ledge at Bishop and Clerks Rock and on October 1, 1858, it flashed out for the first time.

This was an important light when Hyannis was something of a seaport. The picturesque gray granite tower stood 65 feet above the ocean bottom and 56 feet above high water. Its lens of the fifth order threw a beam the strength of 550 candlepower.

John Peak at the discontinuance of the Point Gammon Light moved to Bishop and Clerks as its first lighthouse keeper and served until his death in 1886, age 80 years.

In 1881 Charles H. Hinckley assisted the Lighthouse Keeper of Bishop and Clerks and in 1892 became captain until the government converted the light to all automatic gas light thus doing away with a keeper, and Capt. Hinckley was honorably discharged at age 70 in 1919.

Charles Hinckley was born in 1849—died in 1931, age 82 years.

Captain Hinckley was the smallest lighthouse keeper in the world. He stood just 4 feet 9 inches in his socks.

Everyone on the Cape knew the keeper of Bishop and Clerks Light, and rarely did a summer sojourner return home without paying him a visit.

This is his story as he told it to a Boston Herald reporter in 1907:

"I was 16 years old—and that was 42 years ago—when I got a chance to ship as cabin boy along with Captain Seth Taylor of Yarmouth in the ship Fortune, bound for the East Indies. The East Indies sounded mighty romantic to me in those days. Boys on the Cape who had seen nothing but sand hills and northeast snowstorms fancied a trip to the Indies was like making a fairy voyage to a land inhabited by gay-colored parrots and monkeys with red jackets.

"There were a few things about seafaring life I had to learn before we got out of sight of Cape Cod. The first and most important was to move when spoken to, to jump quickly to one side and avoid the real attack that was sure to come.

"It was 2 years and 6 months before I saw Cape Cod again, and it never looked so good to me before. The sand hills looked like rose beds and nor'easters were only refreshing breezes.

"The next voyage I made was to Western Islands and South America. I knocked about in all sorts of vessels for 15 years and then quit and got a job ashore. In 1881 I entered the Lighthouse Service and have clung to it ever since. At first I was assistant keeper at the station where I am now keeper, and was transferred to Dumpling Rock. In 1892 I became Captain of Bishop and Clerks. This is one of the most important lights on Cape Cod, as it commands both the North and South channels and is of assistance to vessels coming up over the shoals around Monomoy Point.

"It requires lots of philosophy to be a light-keeper on an outside station. At Bishop and Clerks, for example, the keeper has twenty days on and ten days off. The past two years has been the best that has ever been known. Only twice during the winter periods, have the conditions been such that we could not get ashore. In the year 1903, for 48 days the sound was full of ice and at times it was piled around the light to the height of twenty feet.

"The government tender AZALEA comes once a month with a fresh supply of rations, and twice a year the oil boat comes with six months' supply of oil.

"Bishop and Clerks is fitted with an automatic fog bell, which rings once every minute. It also has a fine cellar which is ten feet below high water mark, making it always cool. Besides a kitchen there are two sleeping rooms and the light room."

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For thirty-eight years he attended the light and during that time he never received a scratch or stove a boat.

For twelve more years after 1919 Captain Hinckley was a familiar figure about Hyannis streets. He was always busy, either digging and selling a few clams, doing an odd job here and there, or tending somebody's furnace. It was his habit to rise at 4 a.m., get the home fires going, make a good mug of coffee, and start out to attend his neighbor's fires, doing it all with a cheerful optimism.

Dorinda Bearse Hinckley, wife of Charles H., 38 years lighthouse keeper—greater part of time at Bishop & Clerks, but first at Dumpling Rock Light near New Bedford, where Mrs. Hinckley passed four years, stayed with him occasionally at Bishop and Clerks too, out in Nantucket Sound, seven miles south of Hyannis. She liked to recall experiences at these lighthouses and friends enjoyed hearing them.

This summer of 1966 my friend Mrs Benjamin Cook of Hyannis has told me how she, as a girl used to often sail out to see her uncle Charles Hinckley, lighthouse keeper at Bishop and Clerks, and she "can just smell the cornbread and those boiling lobsters now—in thinking about those trips."

For when the little boat was sighted on the horizon her uncle would put the lobster onto boil and all would be in readiness for a party at sea!

She was the original owner of the much used picture of Bishop and Clerks Lighthouse with the sail boat tied to the wharf shown here.

Charles Hinckley's son, Charles Hinckley, Jr., is the Hyannis Harbormaster (1966) familiar to every boatman in the Harbor for many years. He recalled to me many interesting memories of his youth and life on Great Island and at Lewis Bay—and himself could relate a book on Lewis Bay anecdotes!

This story is reprinted from the book, "Collectors Luck, A Thousand Years at Lewis Bay, Cape Cod" printed in 1967 by G.R. Barnstead Printing Co. There were only 400 copies of this book printed and each book was numbered.

Following is the entire text from the Boston Daily Globe, Sept 12, 1952 as reported by Robert E. Simmons.

Hyannisport, Sept. 11—

The 94-year-old Bishop and Clerks Lighthouse, long a familiar landmark to mariners and vacationers, vanished in a thunderous blast of dynamite at 12:57 p.m. today.

The 68-foot tower, unused as a beacon since a storm damaged it in 1935, was demolished under direction of the Coast Guard, which had judged it unsafe.

Scores of pleasure craft bobbed and circled at a safe distance as summer folk sadly watched the light's destruction which they had protested in vain.

Workmen had labored since sunup this morning, placing dynamite sticks in 68 holes bored in the granite base of the tower.

At three minutes before 1, John Parmenter of Brockton set off the charge from a dory 1000 feet away.

A cloud of smoke partly hid the old tower, which stood swaying for a moment and then toppled to one side like a pile of child's blocks.

All that remained above the base was a heap of rubble that still held in place a two-foot slab of granite, imprinted with the date 1858, which had stood over the door of the lighthouse.

The tower stood on a ledge, exposed at low tide, off Point Gammon, five miles at sea from this town. A 30-foot "day beacon" is to be built on the base.

U.O. MacDonald of Boston, drilling and blasting specialist, handled the demolition. It was a difficult job, he said, because he had to preserve the base of the tower, and because the debris had to be made to fall on the ledge, so that it could be salvaged for future use. MacDonald had little bags of sand placed under each dynamite stick to direct the blast upward.

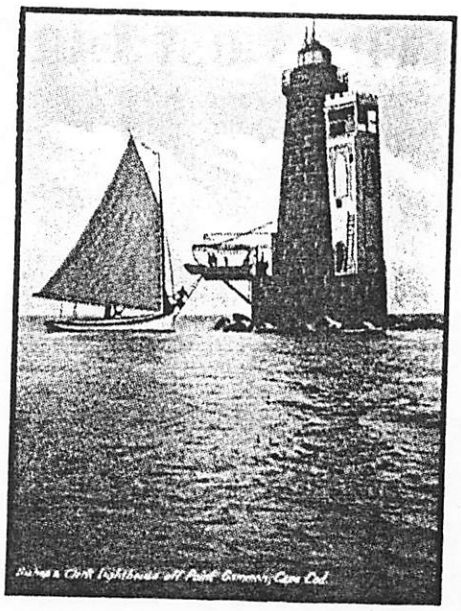
A week of preparations had been made by the McKie Lighter Company of Boston, hired by the government for the job. Everything worked out exactly as planned.

Warren E. Moore, an inspector for the Coast Guard, was there in a supervisory capacity.

The tug Irene and Mary, on the scene, flew a red warning dynamite flag. A government craft kept sightseers at a safe distance.

When they were ready to blast, the tug blew six warning blasts on her whistle. Ten seconds later the explosion came.

The historic Bishop and Clerks Lighthouse was no more.



The Lighthouse from an old postcard.



Charles H. Hinckley (1881-1892) Lighthouse keeper from Bishope & Clerks (4'9") with Walter Carney fo Hyannisport, a ferryboat captain, who stands 6'7" tall.