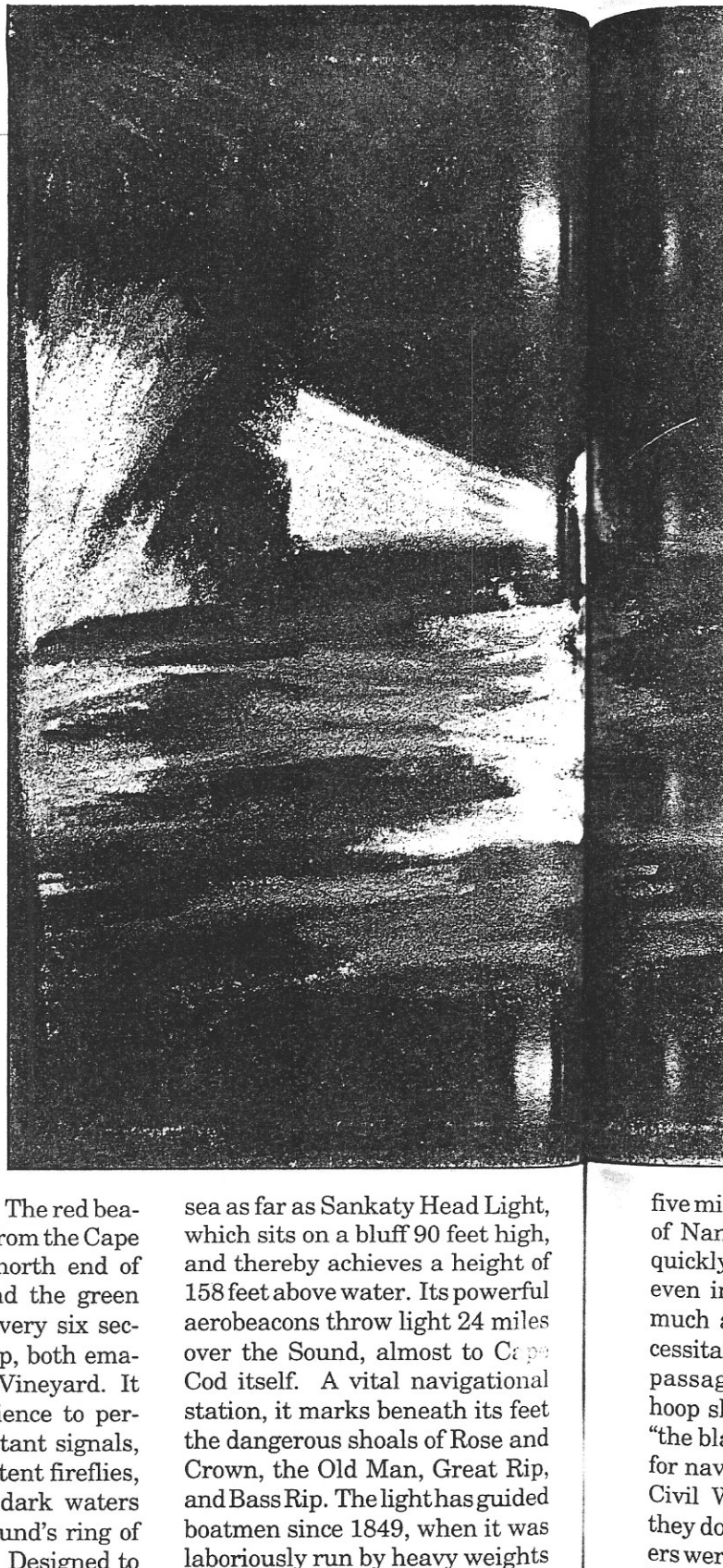
FEATURE

RING of LIGHT

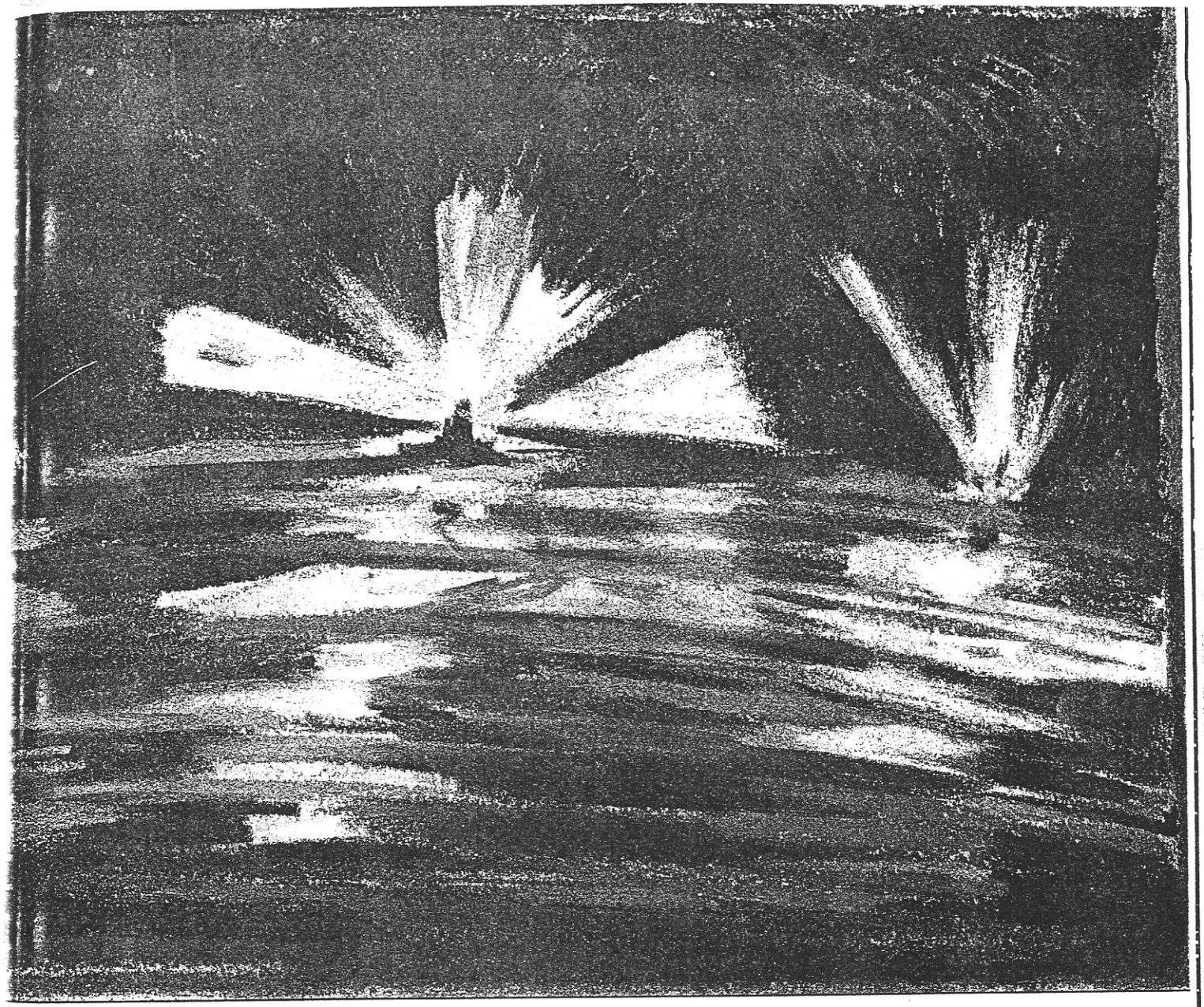


by Catherine A. Hosmer
drawing by David Lazarus

Few sights provide such delight and awe as the light emanating from Nantucket Sound's protective ring of lighthouses at night. As many as six or seven are visible simultaneously if there is no fog, brilliant moon, or interference from lights of other boats. If one is in the right place and knows where to look - about halfway between Hyannis and Nantucket Island - the lights, which have charmed passengers on many a night trip, are visible from Steamship Authority and Hyline boats. At the right location one can see the fixed white light from Monomoy Point, the white 6-second interval from the Bass River Light, and a 5-second flash with its distinctive red sector from Nantucket's Great Point Light, with a flashing white light every 7.6 seconds from Sankaty lighthouse. The red beacon every 4 seconds from the Cape Poge Light at the north end of Chappaquiddick, and the green and dark interval every six seconds from East Chop, both emanate from Martha's Vineyard. It is a mystical experience to perceive the night's distant signals, like flashes of persistent fireflies, transmitted across dark waters from Nantucket Sound's ring of luminous sentinels. Designed to mark hidden shoals and shallow reefs for mariners, their signals are as fascinating to identify in transit as the constellations of stars.

Not all the lights carry to sea as far as Sankaty Head Light, which sits on a bluff 90 feet high, and thereby achieves a height of 158 feet above water. Its powerful aerobeacons throw light 24 miles over the Sound, almost to Cape Cod itself. A vital navigational station, it marks beneath its feet the dangerous shoals of Rose and Crown, the Old Man, Great Rip, and Bass Rip. The light has guided boatmen since 1849, when it was laboriously run by heavy weights and whale oil-until 1933 when the light was electrified. At that time, the Nantucket *Inquirer* declared with pride that "the flashes of light are very brilliant" and "must be visible at a distance of twenty-

five mi
of Nan
quickly
even in
much a
cessita
passag
hoop sk
"the bla
for nav
Civil W
they do
ers wer
lantern
alumin
disadva
light in
stun m
This ca



five miles" across the dark waters of Nantucket Sound. The light quickly grew in importance and even in early years attracted so much attention that visitors necessitated the widening of some passageways to accommodate hoop skirts. Fishermen called it "the blazing star" and looked to it for navigational guidance during Civil War years as ardently as they do now. In 1970, Nantucketers were startled to notice that the lantern had been replaced by an aluminum cap, which among other disadvantages tended to deflect light into neighboring houses and stun motorists on nearby roads. This caused the Coast Guard to reconsider and replace the cap with a more traditional deck and lantern, thereby restoring a more conventional appearance to the lighthouse.

Great Point Light, originally called Sandy Point lighthouse, also achieves a height of 158 feet above sea level and transmits its rays 14 miles across the Sound, virtually half the span from Hyannis to Nantucket Town. But the advantages of its position five miles northward on the sandy tip of the island greatly amplifies its range and makes it a highly visible harbinger of the approach into Nantucket. The structure had been in the planning stages even before the American Revolution because of the many wrecks in area waters, but languished until one side or the other could win the war and allocate funds to translate the plans into reality. Even in 1817, after the first wooden lighthouse burned and a temporary light was suspended thirty-six feet in the air, the beam could be spotted nine to twelve miles at sea because of its prominent location. The first keeper, Captain Paul Pinkham, a former whaler, became famous for publishing an account of the local shoals in the area, on which dozens of ships had foundered. Lit by whale oil, it had 14 lamps in 1838, with fifteen-

Petals & Rice

Wedding Consultants


Vaughan Machado

Four Quince Street, Nantucket, MA 02554
Tel:(508)228-3053 Fax:(508)325-5600

and sixteen-inch reflectors. In 1857, it received the infinitely more efficient Fresnel lenses, as did many lighthouses then in operation. In 1882, kerosene replaced lard oil in the lamps, another distinct advance. A titanic storm finally swamped the old stone structure in 1984 and required replacement. Today, the lantern carries 9283 candle power and a window of solar cells to help provide power and increase efficiency in its mission of guiding boats across Nantucket Sound and the greater Atlantic Ocean.

Bass River Light, at the mouth of the Bass River on Cape Cod, is unusual in that it is privately owned by the Stone Family and operates yearly only from May 1 to October 31. One can spot its bright 6-second signals in summer months long after a boat has departed Hyannis docks and come within range of the measured, bright pulses from both Great Point and Sankaty lights. Taken out of commission in 1880 by the Lighthouse Board because of the efficient nearby Stage Harbor Light, the government sold the property, only to change its mind in 1881 and reestablish the lighthouse. Captain Adams Peak of Hyannis, whose grandfather had been keeper of Point Gammon Light in 1815, was appointed as lightkeeper. In later years, the property was auctioned off to various owners ranging from Harry K. Stone, a Boston Buick dealer, to State Senator Everett Stone of Auburn, Massachusetts. Its Fresnel lens, installed with a modern optic in 1989 when the third generation of the Stone family took over management of the lighthouse and its associated inn, throws brilliant flashing white light 12 miles across the waters of Nantucket Sound. Reactivated to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the Lighthouse Service, the Bass River Light thereby ended seventy-six years of darkness by allowing its fixed white light to once again cast protective beams across Nantucket Sound and up the Bass River.

A white light at the southern tip of Monomoy is guardian of the dangerous shoreline along that spit of land that has at various times been a peninsula, an island, and at present is two islands. Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it now guards a national wildlife refuge. The shoals and rip tides around Monomoy have a treacherous history, for they are the cause of hundreds of drowning deaths in dozens of shipwrecks off the sandy beaches. When the Mayflower attempted to land there, the small boat gave up and turned instead to the safer waters of Cape Cod

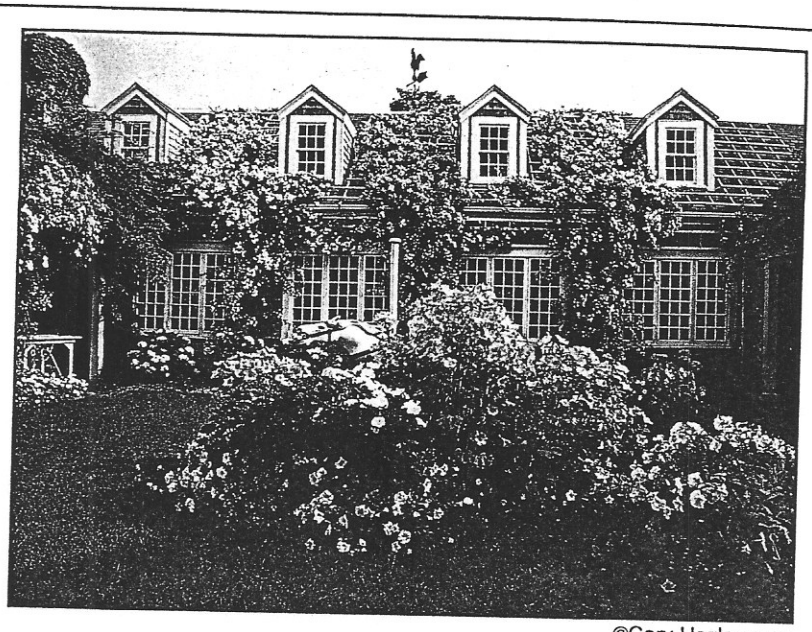
Bay. After the Life-Saving Service was first inaugurated in 1872, a station was quickly placed on Monomoy, taking over services formerly provided by the Humane Society, which had been attempting rescues of shipwrecked men for years. The lighthouse is situated in a similar circumstance as Great Point Light—directly along the sea lanes—so although it is situated only 33 feet above water, its beam is visible and easily identifiable along much of the passage toward Nantucket.

Perhaps most surprising to many is that two lighthouses from Martha's Vineyard can be easily seen on a clear, dark night: those of Cape Poge on the northeast tip of Chappaquiddick, east of the Vineyard, and East Light, on Telegraph Hill on the eastern point of Vineyard Haven harbor. Cape Poge, with a range of nine miles, can be identified toward the west by its flashing red beacon every four seconds. Situated on an extremely vulnerable spit of land, it has been in existence for almost two centuries. Commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson in 1801, it has been moved seven times since then, the last in 1986 by heavy-lift helicopter, which transported the entire tower 150 feet back from sea waters lapping at its base. The present lighthouse was designated as "temporary" in 1893, when the original tower had to be demolished, but has been in continual use ever since.

East Chop Light, commissioned by President Lincoln, was originally designated as a semaphore tower, part of a series of similar towers rimming Nantucket Sound to transmit by code the arrival of ships to the islands. Its range is nine miles and has a distinctive green and dark interval every 6 seconds. The tower is maintained by the Vineyard Environmental Research Institute under contract with the Coast Guard.

Lighthouses have been part of Cape Cod, the "wandering peninsula," for over two hundred years. Essential to navigation, they are also picturesque and photogenic by day. But at night, when exercising their historic function of providing safety and haven to mariners, they are equally as reassuring as they are beautiful. The diversity of their beams across our waters make them identifiable and, like star constellations, a special part of the night sky around the Cape and its ring of islands. ○

Catherine Hosmer and her family have been coming to Nantucket for 35 years. She has published one novel and is currently writing a book on Frank Lloyd Wright.



©Cary Hazlegrove

The Chanticleer

Restaurant de Tradition Francaise

The Wine Spectator "Grand Award" Since 1987
for one of the best wine lists in the world.

The Rich & Famous "Best in the World"
Top 10 most romantic restaurants in the world

'Sconset 257-6231

Jean-Charles Berruet - Chef de Cuisine

Anne & Jean-Charles Berruet Proprietors for the past 22 years