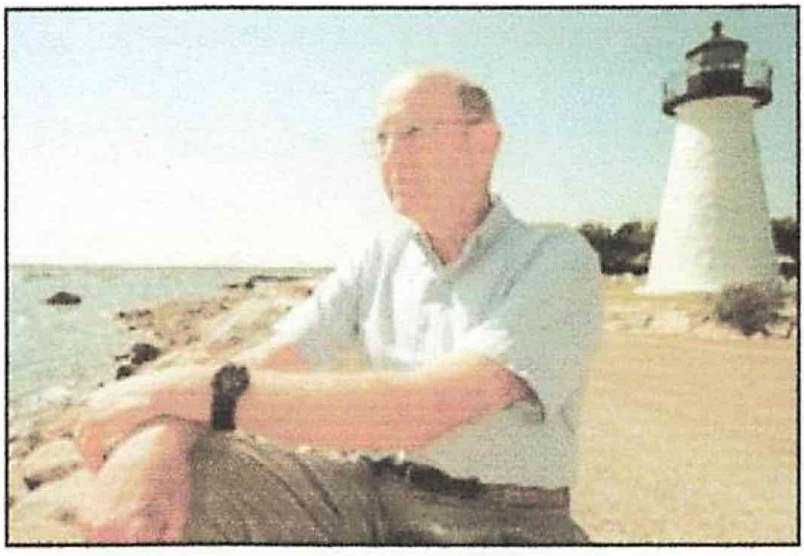
In the dark

Longtime lighthouse keeper removed, but he isn't sure why

By Matt Apuzzo, Standard-Times staff writer



MATTAPOISETT -- After 13 years as a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and seven years as the keeper of the Ned's Point Lighthouse, Clayton L. Hagy was told last month that he would no longer be in charge of the area landmark. What's worse, he said, the Coast Guard has not told him why, after receiving five service medals, he was dismissed.

"Your time, effort, and initiative have been instrumental to the success of this program for Flotilla 67," said Flotilla Commander Renelle M. LeBlanc in a May 10 letter. "As of May 31, 2000, your services ... will no longer be required."

Mr. Hagy said he believes a fellow Guardsman and town resident went behind his back to have him removed.

Ms. LeBlanc refused to comment on her reasoning for removing Mr. Hagy, but Capt. W. Russell Webster, who is stationed in Woods Hole, said the issue stemmed from a perception that Mr. Hagy breached the Coast Guard's chain of command. He added, however, that he was "not familiar with the intricate subplots in the town" surrounding the issue.

Mr. Hagy, who organized tours of the 158-year-old facility, was investigating the possibility that the Mattapoisett Historical Society might take over the upkeep of the historic building, just as many such groups have done for lighthouses across New England.

The lighthouse no longer serves a navigational value, he said, and he found it difficult to enlist enough Guardsmen to

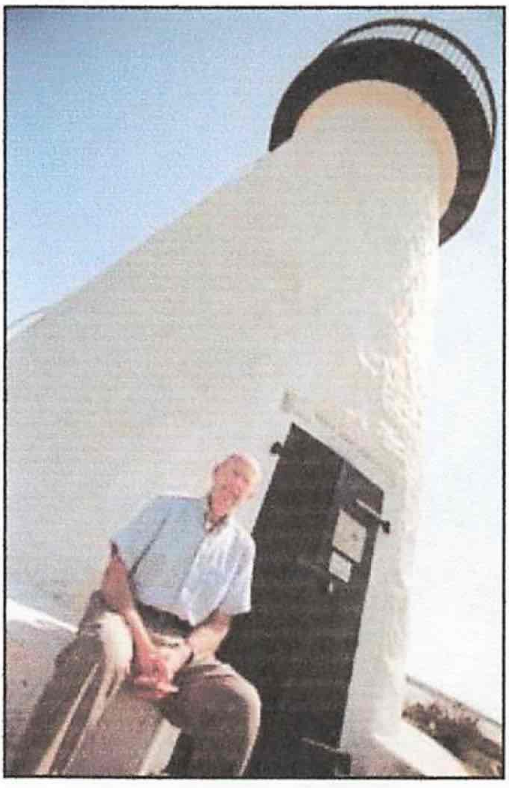
help him give tours of the building. With the support of the Historical Society, he thought, one of the town's landmarks would get the attention it deserves.

On April 21, Mr. Hagy met with Capt. Webster, along with Seth Mendell of the Historical Society to learn what a transfer process would entail and to see if it would be feasible. He planned to bring the information from that meeting to his flotilla -- the local body of the Coast Guard Auxiliary.

At the flotilla's next meeting 20 days later, as Mr. Hagy was preparing to inform his fellow members of his research, he says he was publicly removed from his position in front of his wife and friends.

"I think it was the most embarrassing thing I've ever been through," Mr. Hagy said.

Capt. Webster said while the dismissal came at the discretion of Ms. LeBlanc, Mr. Hagy should not have approached him as a Coast Guard member without first clearing the meeting with Ms. LeBlanc.



Following his meeting with Mr. Hagy and Mr. Mendell, Capt. Webster said he received a telephone call from Elizabeth Theriault, a 25-year Coast Guard veteran and a member of Mr. Hagy's lighthouse team. Ms. Theriault is also a member of the Mattapoisett Historical Commission, a small organization operating with public funds.

Mr. Hagy said he believes in that phone call, Ms. Theriault persuaded Capt. Webster that the lighthouse keeper was acting inappropriately.

Capt. Webster would not comment on aspects of the conversation that dealt with Mr. Hagy, referring to them as "private." He did say, however, that Ms. Theriault called representing the Historical Commission and expressed interest in purchasing the lighthouse property should it become available.

The reason Mr. Hagy's meeting was inappropriate while Ms. Theriault's phone call was not, Capt. Webster said, was that Mrs. Theriault "represented herself as someone from the town, not as an auxiliarist."

"Mrs. Theriault expressed to me that if there was some sort of property we were (selling), that the town would also be interested," Capt. Webster said. "Mrs. Theriault

presented herself as a representative of Mattapoisett, not as an individual auxiliarist."

But Mrs. Theriault, whose husband Albert has since taken over Mr. Hagy's duties at the lighthouse, said she did not represent the town.

"I called as a member of the lighthouse team, and that was part of the Coast Guard Auxiliary team," Ms. Theriault said. "I may have mentioned to him that I was on the Historical Commission, but I was calling as an auxiliarist. Absolutely as an auxiliarist. I called to find out what was going on."

Capt. Webster could not be reached for comment to clarify the differing accounts of the conversation, but Ms. Theriault said she did not think her actions were inappropriate, while Mr. Hagy's were inappropriate because he did not inform the Auxiliary of his actions. Ms. LeBlanc would not comment on whether Ms. Theriault cleared her phone call to Capt. Webster prior to making it.

Ms. LeBlanc said it was "not unusual" for staff officers to change positions without being given a reason for the change. Capt. Webster, however, said it was indeed unusual for that to happen. He also said it was "not standard practice" for officers to be removed from their positions in front of fellow officers, but said Mr. Hagy was not removed in that manner. He was simply told to be quiet.

He would not comment further on the specifics of the meeting because, he said, "this was internal Coast Guard business. These meetings are in general not public meetings."

Ms. LeBlanc would not comment on the discrepancies in the various accounts of what went into the decision to fire Mr. Hagy, but did say she "thought someone else might do a better job" handling the lighthouse. She would not say which aspects of managing the lighthouse Mr. Hagy did not handle acceptably.

Mr. Hagy received the 1999 Standard-Times Mattapoisett Man of the Year for his work at the Ned's Point Lighthouse.

For now, he is left wondering what led to his dismissal. He maintains he acted as he has always acted -- in the best interest of the town and of the lighthouse.

"This was totally unexpected," he said. "I don't know what I did, but I didn't do anything wrong."