All Along The Watchtower

A glimpse into the history of some of Massachusetts' famous lighthouses

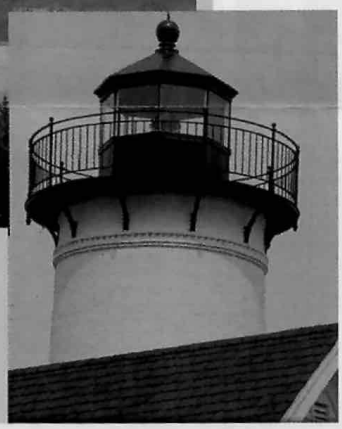
by Seneca Clark

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT M. ERB

America's first and longest operating lighthouse: Boston Light

TODAY, MOST SHIPS GLIDing along the Atlantic have high-tech navigational equipment to avoid rocks and unexpected shallow passes. But it wasn't always so; in the days when water was more widely used as a means of transportation, maneuvering through the cantankerous inlets of the Massachusetts coastline was no easy task. Shipwrecks were frequent, especially in the inky, midnight waters. And, so, the Commonwealth developed a system of lighthouses, beckoning sailors to the shore.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SENECA CLARK



Above, Edgartown Light is picture perfect. Right, West Chop Light protects Vineyard Haven. Next page, Nauset Light stands tall after being rescued in 1996.

Though many lights have fallen over time, several still stand, beacons leading the way for local fishermen and smaller boats lacking modern day navigational conveniences. Mentioned here are a few that serve not only as guiding lights, but as points of historical interest and beloved buildings to the locals.

The first lighthouse in the United States was built in 1716 on the Boston Harbor Islands' Little Brewster Island. As Boston developed as a city, shipbuilding and trade became profitable markets, and Bostonians became seafarers, but the dangers were great, and merchants demanded a lighthouse. And so the city subsidized the construction of **Boston Light** by charging vessels entering or leaving the harbor a tax of a penny per ton. The Revolutionary War was devastating to much of Boston, and Boston Light was almost completely destroyed by the British, but in 1783, the light was rebuilt. In 1859, the tower was raised 14 feet so the light could be seen from 27 miles at sea.

Today, the tower stands at the same height of 102 feet above sea level, flashing its 1.75 million candlepower light every 10 seconds. Due to protests by preservation groups and petitions signed by Ted Kennedy, it is the only lighthouse in the United States that has not been automated—Coast Guard staff remains on the island. After 285 years, the light is the longest continually-operating lighthouse in North America.

Not long after Boston Light was erected, several others were built along the Massachusetts coastline. Winding their way around present day Cape Cod, there are several lights that stand guard over the tumultuous Atlantic waters. Woods Hole Harbor has long been a docking area for mariners, and serves today as a busy port for ferries from the Cape to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. In dire need of direction, the **Nobska Point Light** was built in 1828. The original form was not a tower, but a saltbox-style keepers' house where a lantern was simply lit on the rooftop. The house was poorly constructed, and the lantern was impractical, so in 1876, a cast-iron, brick-lined tower was built, resembling many lights of the time, as it was easy to build and sturdy. Many are still in use today. For years, the tower was painted brown, but the white structure can now be seen in its original spot, gleaming in the sun.

A bit further from mainland Massachusetts is the **West Dennis Light**, at the Lighthouse Inn. Built in 1854—though it was actually reported to be superfluous—at the mouth of the Bass River, the light was illuminated in 1855, remaining in service for 25 years until it was deemed unnecessary. In 1881, the government relit the West Dennis Light, which lead the way until 1914 when it was sold to a private owner who expanded the main house and landscaped the property. The estate was then purchased by the Stone family, who had intentions of developing the land. For extra income, the Stones took in overnight guests, and so many asked to return that they decided to form the Lighthouse Inn, still in operation today. In 1989, after being dark for 75 years, the West Dennis Light was rekindled, and it is now the only privately-owned and maintained working lighthouse in the United States.

In 1808, Cape Cod's second lighthouse was built in Chatham. At the time, there were two 40-foot wooden towers. Because the area is predominantly sand, the contractor was unable to find enough stone for two structures. Moveable range lights were installed, marking a safe pass of water. Ship captains knew that if the lights were out of alignment it meant that by approaching

the snaggletoothed shoals they risked running aground. By 1841, the wooden towers were not standing up well to weather. They were replaced by new brick towers, and the lights were exchanged for fixed fourth-order Fresnel lenses (lenses used especially for spotlights). But the wood of the first twin towers was not the only thing affected by the inconstant weather of the Cape; the sandy banks were also worn away. In 1870, the lights were documented to be 228 feet from the edge of the cliff on which they stood. Six years later, they were 95 feet from the edge, 48 feet a year later, and in 1879, the south tower disappeared over the cliff's ledge, soon followed by the north tower. By 1881, two towers, made of iron plates lined with brick, were built and the lights from the previous towers (saved prior to their demise) were installed. The **Chatham Light Station** overlooked the town's waters until 1923, when it became too expensive to maintain. So, the twins were separated, and the north tower was moved to Nauset. The south tower's lantern room was rebuilt in 1969, and in 1982 the light was automated, but the old lantern room can now be viewed at the Chatham Historical Society.

Chatham's north tower that was moved was not the first lighthouse at Nauset. The original station, comprised of three small brick towers, was established in 1839 and called "The Three Sisters of Nauset." After 50 years of erosion, the Three Sisters were in danger of collapsing over the cliff's edge. The Lighthouse Board had three new towers built. Well aware of the fact that the ocean would continue to encroach on the land, the new towers were made of wood so that they could be moved more easily. But it became too costly to run all three towers, and only one remained in use, being called "The Beacon," which was replaced by Chatham's light in 1923. In 1940, the tower was painted red and white to match its light. The building stood strong until just recently. Knowing that the light was, once again, in danger of falling over the edge of the bluff, fundraising began to rescue the **Nauset Light** in the 1990s. In 1996, when it was a mere 25 feet from disaster, the mission was accomplished, and Nauset Light was rescued and moved 300 feet west to a site that should be safe for many years.

In the town of Truro stands Cape Cod Light Station, better known to locals as **Highland Light**. Built in 1797, Highland Light was the first of the Cape's lighthouses and was authorized by George Washington. The light surveyed the sea from 183 feet above, preventing shipwrecks that had been so prevalent between Cape Ann and Nantucket before its construction. Like the Cape's other lights, Highland Light has had several transformations over the years. In 1857, the first building was reported unsafe and was replaced by a structure with a first-order Fresnel lens. The light was traded in for a room-sized Fresnel lens supported on a pool of Mercury in 1901. Thirty-one years later, to increase the light's visibility, the Fresnel light was exchanged for a 1000-watt electric lamp—it could be spotted a remarkable 45 miles away. The now-automated light is a pair of Fresnel-lensed aerobeacons, each with two 1000-watt electric lamps. Like many other lighthouse locations, Highland Light was victim to erosion. In 1990 alone, somewhere between 40 and 117 feet of cliff were lost to the sea. 1996 was a busy year for lighthouse movers; besides Nauset Light being moved, Highland Light was transported to a spot 570 feet from the cliff on Highland Golf Links.

Edgartown, on Martha's Vineyard, was once one of the island's busiest harbors and a popular whaling port. In 1828, a beacon was added to a keepers' house at the harbor's edge. The sturdy building held up for over 100 years until 1939 when it was replaced by an 1870s-style tower from Ipswich. Like Nobska, **Edgartown Light**, it was made of cast iron with brick lining, and it still stands, overlooking the waterfront and Chappaquiddick Island.

Vineyard Haven has been an important harbor ever since the Vineyard's early days because it is well protected from harsh waters. Today, the ferries from the mainland dock at Vineyard Haven. Two lights mark the approach to this inlet: **East Chop Light** and **West Chop Light**. East Chop Light was originally privately-owned for years before the Civil War, until the government took it over in the 1870s. The light was considered to be deficient and was interchanged with a cast-iron, brick-lined tower with a new keepers' house in the late 1870s. The house is gone, but the light still welcomes people to the island. West Chop Light was raised in 1817 on a hill where it stood some 60 feet above the ocean. The brick tower that claims the spot today watches over the island's busiest ports.

One of the Vineyard's most important lights was **Gay Head Light**, marking the way for sailors navigating the waters between the Elizabeth Islands and Martha's Vineyard as they sailed to and from Vineyard Sound. The first light was built in 1799. Because the structure was mounted high on Gay Head's cliffs, its illumination was often masked by the dense fog, so the tower was raised and lowered several times before the proper height was discovered. The optics didn't reach the standards required of such an important light, and, by 1856, a new light was built with a first-order optic. The tower still remains there, a prop in the seemingly perfect setting of colorful cliffs, sparkling blue waters and dramatic landscape.

Approaching Nantucket Island by boat, **Brant Point Light** is clearly visible at the harbor's edge. Today, the tenth tower stands in this location. The first, built because of Nantucket's key role in the whaling industry, was erected in 1746—North America's second light after Boston—and was maintained by the town. Early lights were as rudimentary as lanterns on platforms and were easily destroyed. The first was lost to fire in 1758, the second ruined by a storm, third to flames.... The seventh tower was built atop a keepers' house; it was the first permanent structure, serving until 1856 when a 47-foot tower was constructed in its place. It still stands, but without a lantern room. Sand build-up required that a new beacon be built by 1901. This, the current tower, stands at 26 feet—the shortest of New England's lights. As ferries depart from Nantucket, visitors toss pennies to the ocean floor in front of Brant Point Light—a superstition ensuring that they will return to the island. **(Map page 47)**