Graves Light: Granite Guardian of Boston's Outer Harbor



The walkway from the tower at Graves Light to the oil house shown here has been destroyed in storms. Photograph courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

By Jeremy D'Entremont

Weather-beaten Graves Lighthouse, flashing white two times every 12 seconds in the outer limits of Boston Harbor, looks to the unknowing observer like a more ancient structure than its neighbor, venerable Boston Light. But Graves Light is actually one of Massachusetts' youngest lighthouses.

In 1843 lighthouse inspector I. W. P. Lewis expressed surprise that there was no beacon on the ledges called the Graves. Contrary to popular belief, the ledges are not named because they resemble gravestones, or because of a high incidence of shipwrecks in the vicinity. They were named in the 1600s for Thomas Graves, Vice-Admiral of Governor Winthrop's Navy and said to be America's first foreign trader. The name appears on charts as early as 1687.

In 1854 an iron bell buoy was placed near the area. This was later replaced by a whistling buoy, described in the Boston Globe as producing "the most weirdly mournful and blood-chilling sounds."

A new major shipping channel into Boston Harbor, the Broad Sound Channel, opened in the early 20th century. Prior to this, the main entrance to the busy harbor was between Point Allerton in Hull and the outer harbor islands. The creation of the new channel necessitated the building of a lighthouse at the Graves. In 1902 a sum of $188,000 was authorized for the tower and Governor Crane of Massachusetts signed a deed conveying 435,400 square feet at the Graves to the Federal Government. At first the location was to be a rock called the Northeast Graves, but the site was changed to the Graves in 1903.

A major engineering feat

The building of the 113-foot Graves Lighthouse was one of the most impressive feats of American lighthouse engineering. The work took place from 1903 to 1905 and was supervised by Royal Luther of Malden, Massachusetts. The style of Graves Light is very similar to Maine's Ram Island Ledge Light, built about the same time.

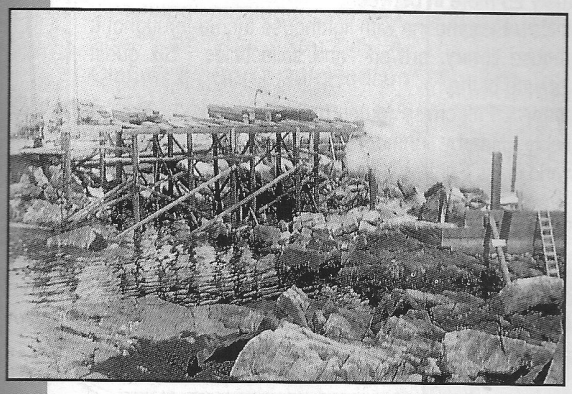
The granite for Graves Light was cut at Rockport on Massachusetts' Cape Ann. Rock on the ledges was blasted and the foundation was laid just four feet above the low tide mark. The lower courses were bolted three feet deep into the ledge.

A schooner transported materials from Lovell's Island, 3 1/2 miles away, to the Graves, and a 75-foot steamer transported workers to the site. A shanty was constructed on the highest ledge of the Graves, connected to the wharf by a 90-foot elevated walkway. The shanty had living quarters, a storeroom, a blacksmith shop, and a kitchen, and up to 30 men lived there in the summers of 1903 and 1904. In the summer of 1903 the first 42 feet were completed.

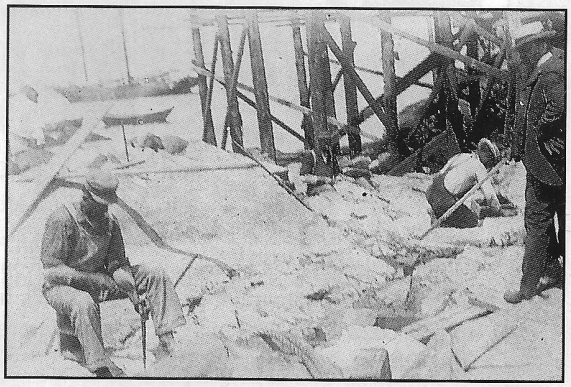
While the granite was being put in place, the iron work was being manufactured in Boston and a huge first order Fresnel lens was being created in Paris. The summer of 1904 saw the lighthouse reach a height of 88 feet. The following year construction was completed. A granite oil house was built 90 feet south of the tower, reachable by a footbridge. A wharf was built near the tower, protected by 2,000 tons of riprap.

"The most important light north of Cape Cod"

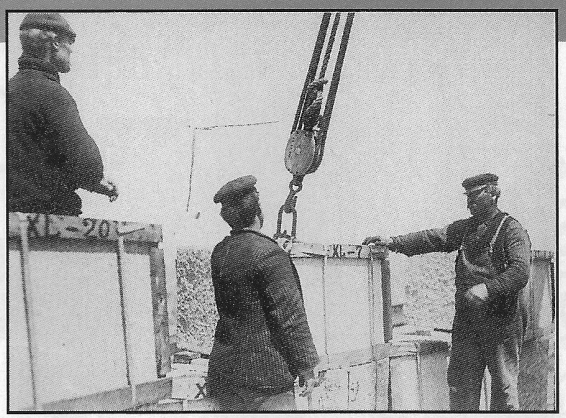
On the night of September 1, 1905, Graves Light's first keeper, Elliot C. Hadley, first lighted what was then the most powerful lighthouse in Massachusetts' history. The gigantic lens floated on 400 pounds of mercury. After the



Blasting to clear the ledge in preparation for the construction of Graves Light in Boston Harbor. Photograph from the Edward Rowe Snow Collection.



Workmen clearing the ledge in preparation for the construction of Graves Light in Boston Harbor. Photograph courtesy of the Edward Rowe Snow Collection.



Masons moving granite blocks during the construction of Graves Light. Photograph courtesy of Edward Rowe Snow Collection.

completion of Graves Light, a Lighthouse Establishment report stated:

"At so exposed a site the height necessary for the lantern above the heavier masses of spray, the consequent geographic range, its location so far seaward, the service of the light to the large commerce of Boston and modern ships of deep draft, make it perhaps the most important light north of Cape Cod."

When it went into service, Graves Light was measured at 380,000 candlepower. The light was later upgraded to 3.2 million candlepower, and for many years it was the most powerful light in New England. Graves Light was also equipped with a powerful Daboll fog trumpet.

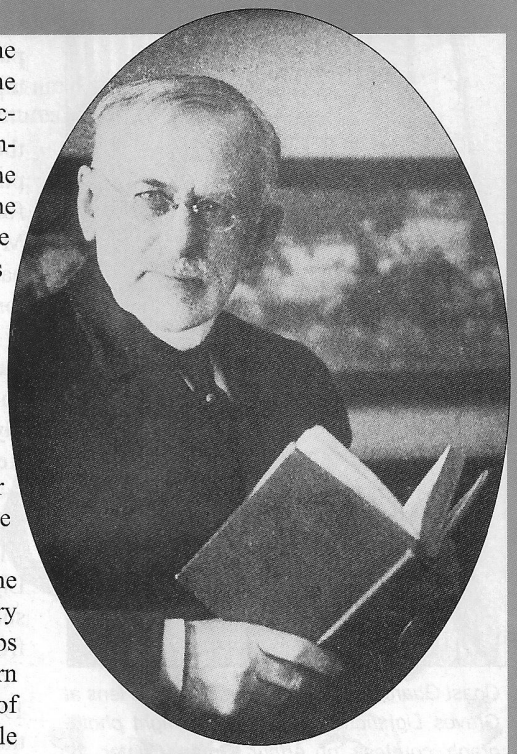
The keepers' bedrooms were on the fourth and fifth stories of Graves Light. "It's like living in a pipe," said one keeper. The first story was the landing and storage space, the second was the engine room containing fog-signal equipment, and the third floor was the kitchen. The fourth floor contained two double bunk beds, and the fifth floor was a library and watch room.

Two of the floors and all the walls were finished with enameled bricks. The handrails on the stairways were mahogany, and the rest of the woodwork was oak. One newspaper article claimed "as interior fittings go, it is the finest lighthouse in the country."

The entrance to the lighthouse was at the top of a 40-foot ladder, which made entry difficult in rough weather. Hand grips were built into the outside of the lantern room, which made the treacherous job of cleaning the outside of the glass a little easier.

The 1,500-gallon water cistern in the bottom of the lighthouse was filled twice yearly by a lighthouse tender, and food was delivered regularly to Graves Light. The keepers augmented their diet with lobsters caught in their own traps around the ledges.

Elliot Hadley, the first keeper, was credited with saving two men whose canoe had overturned near the ledges in the fall of 1910. Hadley launched his dory into heavy seas and was able to reach the men. He brought them to the lighthouse and they made it safely back to shore the following day. On another occasion Hadley rescued the passengers of a swamped sailboat.



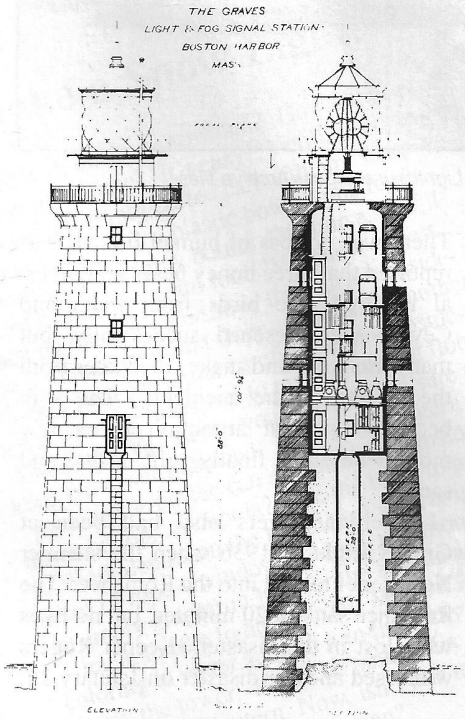
Col. William Sanford Stanton of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and Engineer for the 2nd Lighthouse District of the U.S. Lighthouse Service was the man who oversaw the building of Graves Lighthouse in Boston Harbor. Photograph courtesy of Adelaide F. Cumming from the Massachusetts Historical Society archives.

Storms and shipwrecks

In 1910 Keeper Hadley described the conditions at Graves Light in storms:

"I've looked up at solid water rushing in toward the ledges. I don't know how far up the solid water comes. I've been knocked down by it on the wharf beside the light, and opening a window to look out more than halfway up the tower, I've had as much as three buckets-full dashed in my face."

In December 1916 First Assistant Keeper Harry Whin was alone at the lighthouse and running short on supplies when a ferocious storm struck. Whin had



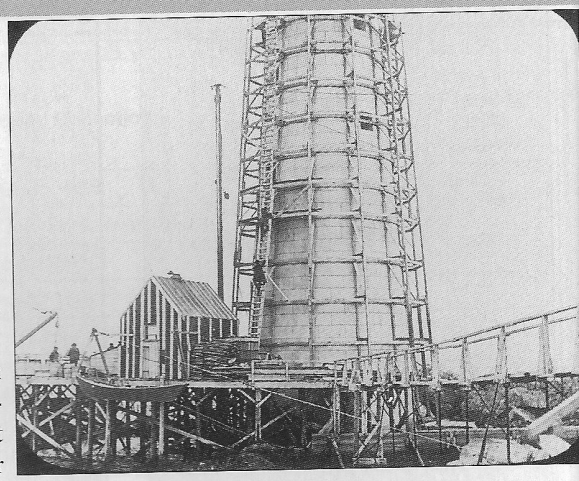
A drawing from the original blueprints of the Graves Lighthouse in Boston Harbor, MA. From the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.



Coast Guardsman Ray Curren hauling in lobster traps at Graves Lighthouse in 1945. Copyright photograph courtesy of Arthur Griffin Center for Photographic Art, Winchester, MA.



Assembled granite blocks for Graves Lighthouse at a stone quarry in Cape Ann, MA. Photograph courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.



Graves Light in Boston Harbor, MA under construction. Photograph courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

1941, when the fishing schooner Mary E. O'Hara struck a barge anchored near The Graves. The men on the schooner climbed the icy rigging in a desperate effort to stay alive as the vessel slowly sank, but only five of the 24 on board survived. It was the third worst shipwreck in Boston Harbor's history.

The Coast Guard era

The Coast Guard took over the operation of Graves Light in the early 1940s. During the Coast Guard era there were generally two keepers on duty at all times, with each man spending three weeks at the lighthouse followed by one week off.

In 1947 the Coast Guard crew had some unusual entertainment as the lighthouse served as a filming location for a the David O. Selznick production, Portrait of Jennie, starring Joseph Cotten and Jennifer Jones. Graves Light was supposed to be an abandoned Cape Cod lighthouse where Cotten's character went to paint in solitude. The climax of the movie takes place on the ledges around Graves Light with Cotten looking for his lost love, Jennie. The crew spent 10 days in and around the lighthouse.

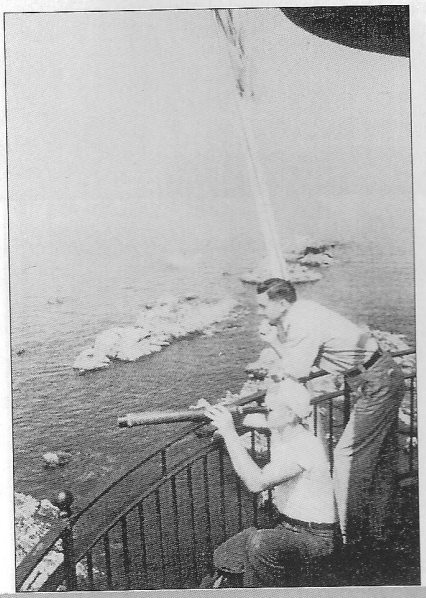
Coast Guardsman Larry Bowers was stationed at Graves Light from 1961 to 1963. Like other keepers before him, Bowers experienced some mighty storms. "We had one storm when I was on board with waves coming over the top of the light," he recalls. "The waves knocked out the window on the first deck and killed the generator."

Bowers enjoyed scuba diving around the ledges, and he sometimes explored the wreck of the City of Salisbury. He even fashioned pieces of brass and copper from the wreck into a belt buckle. He remembers that "after a storm once in a while a bale of rubber [from the City of Salisbury] would pop up and we'd call the Point [Allerton Coast Guard Station] to haul it in."

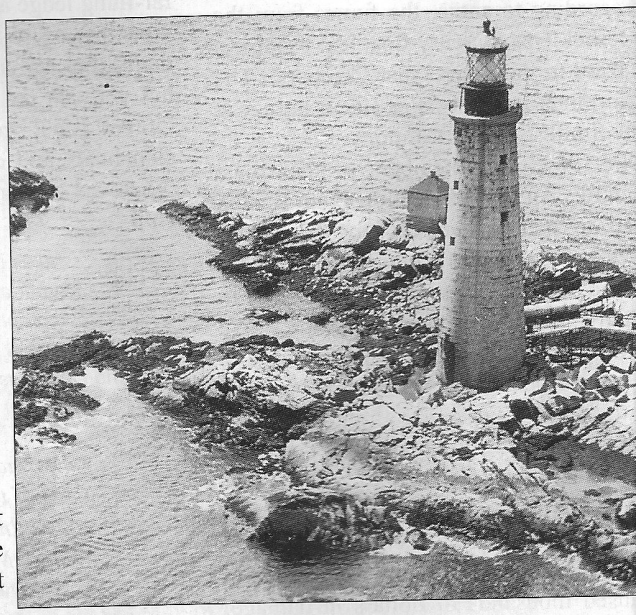
Bowers says that visits from the buoy tender, which brought water and fuel, were welcomed at the isolated lighthouse. "Except," he says, "one time when they pumped fuel into the water tank. No fun on that one. Number two diesel takes a long time to get out of a cistern. We had to pump it dry, and clean it, whitewash it and bleach it. Still didn't help much. We only used that tank in emergencies."

Another of Bowers' memories is his first Thanksgiving at the lighthouse. He was at the station with one other man, Seama John Mariani. Bowers and Mariani got turkey for the holiday, but neither of the had prepared one before. "We stuffed th wrong end," says Bowers, "and didn take the giblets out. Just couldn't figu out why we couldn't get all the stuffing i We made mashed potatoes, veggi enough for an army. Just me and Joh We ate turkey the rest of the week."

Bowers also remembers a summer vi from historian Edward Rowe Snow, w gave him a copy of his book Famous Ne England Lighthouses. In 1967 Snow he



Coast Guardsman Ray Curren and Bob Burton on the lantern deck at Graves Light, Boston Harbor in 1945. Copyright photograph courtesy of Arthur Griffin Center for Photographic Art, Winchester, MA.



Graves Light, Boston Harbor in its heyda Photograph courtesy of the Massachuset Historical Society.