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The Lighthouse Inn: A Shining Beacon for Travelers
by Jeremy D'Entremont

The Bass River Lighthouse, now the busy and colorful Lighthouse Inn, has had so many additions over the years that it barely looks like the same building that was erected in 1855. Only the lantern on the roof gives it away. The building now has had a longer life as an inn than it had in its original incarnation as a government-built lighthouse. It also has a bright new life as a restored aid to navigation and as the centerpiece of a local educational program.

Bass River Lighthouse, 1855-1914

For some years prior to the building of the lighthouse in 1855, a man named Warren Crowell had kept a lantern burning in the attic window of his house at Wrinkle Point to aid local mariners in the vicinity of the mouth of the Bass River. Oil for his lantern was paid for by ship captains who each donated 25 cents a month.

The *Yarmouth Register* of January 24, 1850 reported, "A petition is in circulation... asking Congress to substitute a Light House for the Beacon which has been ordered to be built on the breakwater at the mouth of the Bass River. There is much more need of such a guide and safeguard to the navigation through the Sound than of many similar ones on the coast. Certainly a lighthouse it should be, rather than a beacon."

Congress appropriated $4,000 in 1850 for a lighthouse in West Dennis. Warren Crowell's granddaughter Millie Crowell Stringer later recalled a "smaller lighthouse" placed to mark the jetty off West Dennis Beach prior to 1855. Apparently a small lighthouse or beacon of some kind was erected on the jetty, but little is known about it.

Oxen hauled building materials for the lighthouse across the local marshes, and when the lighthouse was finished Warren Crowell appropriately became the first keeper. In 1972 Marion Crowell Ryder painted a vivid picture of the lighthouse's early years in *Cape Cod Remembrances*:

"The house stood tall and solid and foursquare, quite a distance back from the edge of the water. In those days the beach presented a busy scene... It was lined with fishing dories, moored or drawn up on the sand, and great piles of

long, slender weir poles were stacked here and there... Atop the sand dunes straggled an uneven line of small, weatherbeaten fish shanties where their owners could store their gear and warm themselves about battered little stoves in inclement weather. When we went to the beach as children we never tired of wandering along the shore, watching the fishermen mending their nets, settling out for their weirs, or bringing in a shining catch... The lighthouse itself always dominated the beach with its purpose and significance. "

Warren Crowell was keeper until 1880, with nine years away from the job in the 1860s. He was wounded and taken prisoner in Virginia during the Civil War. During Crowell's war service he arranged for his wife and nine children to live in a house on Fisk Street in West Dennis. This might have been a welcome change for the children after being crowded into the small bedrooms of the lighthouse.

One of the keepers who served during the war was Captain James Chase. His granddaughter, Carrie May Sheridan, later remembered seeing ships anchored offshore while friends and families waited on the West Dennis Beach for the passengers' arrival. "Horse-drawn wagons drove into the shallow water's edge to take them ashore," she recalled.

Another keeper during Crowell's absence was Zelotes Wixon of Dennis, who came to Bass River Light in July 1861. Wixon complained that when he arrived at the lighthouse expecting to be trained, the previous keeper, James Chase, "refused me all access to the light until the first day of August though I several times requested permission to look at it and examine the same in order to fit me for my position and the proper discharge of my duties." Wixon also reported that the outgoing keeper was apparently adulterating the oil used in the lighthouse. Everything apparently worked out eventually, as a couple of months later an inspector stated, "Mr. Wixon is now performing his duty with entire faithfulness and ability and has been ever since his misfortune in August last."

In 1880 Bass River Light was discontinued and sold at auction after the lighting of Stage Harbor Light in Chatham. A newspaper reported that Keeper Crowell returned "to his former residence where he is having a barn built."

Six months later complaints caused the government to buy the lighthouse back and relight it in 1881. Captain Samuel Adams Peak of Hyannis became keeper, remaining until his death in 1906. Captain Peak had gone to sea as a boy and served as master of two barks before becoming a lighthouse keeper. His grandfather had been keeper of Point Gammon Light in Hyannis, and his father was a keeper of three Cape Cod lights for a total of 62 years.

After Keeper Peak's death Russell Eastman became the station's final keeper. Marion Crowell Ryder later described Eastman as "taciturn and unceasingly busy

keeping the lighthouse and its out-buildings in spotless condition." Mrs. Eastman, wrote Ryder, "always had a warm welcome awaiting us in the house. It came to be that no trip to the beach was complete without a visit in her immaculate kitchen. She was a wonderful cook as innumerable doughnuts and cookies testified, but especially was she skilled in doing the most beautiful embroidery that I have ever seen. Literally, for her, there were 'long winter evenings' when the wind raged and the foaming tide made an island of the lighthouse and she found solace in turning her mind toward creating a wealth of flowers and butterflies on table linens and dress lengths which had been ordered over the summer. Several of us wore dresses of her exquisite workmanship when we graduated from High School."

The government considered the lighthouse unnecessary with the advent of the Cape Cod Canal and the installation of an automatic beacon, the Bass River West Jetty Light at the entrance to the Bass River. It was extinguished in 1914 and its fourth order Fresnel lens was removed.

The Lighthouse Inn and New Life for the Lighthouse

The property was sold at auction. Car dealer Harry K. Noyes used it as a summer residence for a while. He expanded the main house and added several new buildings. After Noyes' death the property was unoccupied for about five years, until 1938 when State Senator Everett Stone bought it. The Stones began to have overnight guests at the lighthouse, and it became so popular that they soon opened it as the Lighthouse Inn.

Everett Stone's son Bob became the head of the food service for the inn. Bob Stone met a young waitress named Mary Packard, a Wheaton College student who worked at the inn for the summer. The two married in 1942. Bob and Mary Stone still own and operate the inn, five children and nearly 60 years later. Mary Stone recalls that during World War II, American planes bombed the rocks near the Lighthouse Inn for practice. The guests would gather on the beach and cheer the show. A 1944 hurricane destroyed the dining room and the oil house, but the Stones continued to expand.

The Lighthouse Inn has a summer staff of about 85. Bob and Mary's son Greg Stone is now President of the inn, and his wife Patricia is the General Manager. Nelson Cook, who worked as a waiter at the inn in 1957, returned a few years ago as Director of Marketing.

For years Greg Stone found it difficult to return to the inn when coming back from Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard, since the small navigation lights blended with

other lights on the shore. He convinced the Coast Guard that a relighted Bass River lighthouse would provide a needed service to local boaters.

In 1989 the Stone family had their lighthouse relighted as a private aid to navigation, with a 300 mm optic providing a white flashing light. The relighting took place on National Lighthouse Day, the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Lighthouse Service. The light, officially designated the West Dennis Light, now operates each year from May 1 to November 1.

For many years the Lighthouse Inn has been a beacon to mariners and travelers, and it now also serves as a beacon for education. There is a program that enables local third-grade schoolchildren to tour the inn and lighthouse as part of a curriculum on maritime history. The program was originally designed with the help of the Cape Cod Discovery Museum. The children also visit Chatham Lighthouse and the Three Sisters Lighthouses in Eastham.

Upwards of 350 children from Dennis and Yarmouth have visited the lighthouse during this program each year for the past three years in the month of May. The children learn why lighthouses were important to mariners, what the duties of lighthouse keepers were, and what family life was like in a lighthouse. They also learn about the different types of ships that were once common in Cape Cod waters. The children follow their teachers from room to room in the inn, looking at ship paintings and models. When the teacher says "This ship has three masts, so it has to be…" the children shout, "Full rigged!" The students eventually crowd a few at a time into the lantern room of the lighthouse and finish their visit by sitting outside and sketching the Lighthouse Inn.

The Lighthouse Inn features 700 feet of private beach, with 68 rooms and cottages (with working fireplaces), tennis courts, a cocktail lounge and a waterfront dining room offering a five-course dinner every evening. The inn also has a special children's program in the summer, with a Children's Director who plans and supervises activities for the children of guests. And if you stay at the inn you might also be able to arrange a tour of the lighthouse and lantern room.

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