Centuries ago, the Lower Cape Area appeared on Viking maps as “Straumey,” which meant “an island of strong currents. To this day the dangerous tides and currents, rips and shoals along Chatham, the elbow of the Cape, are not only the most treacherous along Cape Cod, but along the Atlantic Coast.

In 1869, the director of the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey wrote, “There is no other part of the world, perhaps, where tides of such very small rise and fall are accompanied by such strong currents running far out to sea.”

From 1823-1923, Monomoy Light served as a coastal landmark for sailors navigating this dangerous stretch. The original lighthouse was replaced in 1855 and a “modern” cast-iron tower to over in the 1870s. This light, refurbished by a private contractor in 1989, exists today.

The Monomoy Station, located north of the Light, was one of the original nine established on the Cape under the United States Life-Saving Service. The Monomoy Point Station, located at the extreme end of the island was intended to replace it; however, after what became known as the “Monomoy Disaster” in March of 1902, the department decided to continue service from both stations.

On that terrible day, Captain Marshall W. Eldredge and six crew members perished while trying to rescue five passengers from the stranded barge Wadena. The only survivor of that disaster was Seth L. Ellis, who later commanded the Monomoy station. Captain Elmo F. Mayo braved the seas in a small dory to rescue him.

Ellis was born in Harwich Port in 1858 to a life at sea. His father was a West Indies tradesman, so Ellis went to sea when he was only nine. In his mid-teens, he joined a fleet of mackerel fisherman, then served on the crew of the schooner Enos B. Phillips of Boston. It was on this schooner, he witnessed the true power and brutality of the sea. A terrible blizzard took the vessel’s masts, sails, jib boom and bowsprit. It then pushed the schooner across the Gulf Stream and beyond shipping tracks. Several days passed and the crew suffered greatly. However Captain. T. Reuben Allen, also of Harwich Port, refused to admit defeat and gradually brought the schooner back to harbor.

In 1902, Captain Joseph C. Kelley of Brewster took command of Monomoy Point Light. At the age of 28, he became the youngest life-saving keeper on Cape Cod. Shortly after the new station was manned, five disasters occurred on nearby shoals. Captain Kelley and his crew saved each vessel; not a life was lost in the process. In J.W. Dalton’s book, “The Lifesavers of Cape Cod,” first published in 1902, he describes the station at the point:

“…there are three surf-boats. One of these boats is a self-bailer, the only one on Cape Cod. There are also two beach carts with apparatus and one life-car. Six surfmen with Keeper Kelley go in the self-bailer at the time of shipwreck. A horse owned by the government, called ‘Susan,’ is kept at the station to assist in hauling the apparatus to scenes of disaster. There are also two other horses owned by the surfmen kept there. Cats are the pets of the surfmen, a half dozen making their home at the station.”

Both the light and life-saving station were decommissioned in 1923. All that remains today is a wooden lightkeeper’s house, a cast iron light tower lined with brick and a brick generator house, listed on the National Register of Historic Houses.

Copyright © 2002 eCape, Inc. & CapeCodTravel.Com
Questions? Comments? Call (508) 240-1212 or email info@ecape.com

« Site Sponsors »

-top of page-