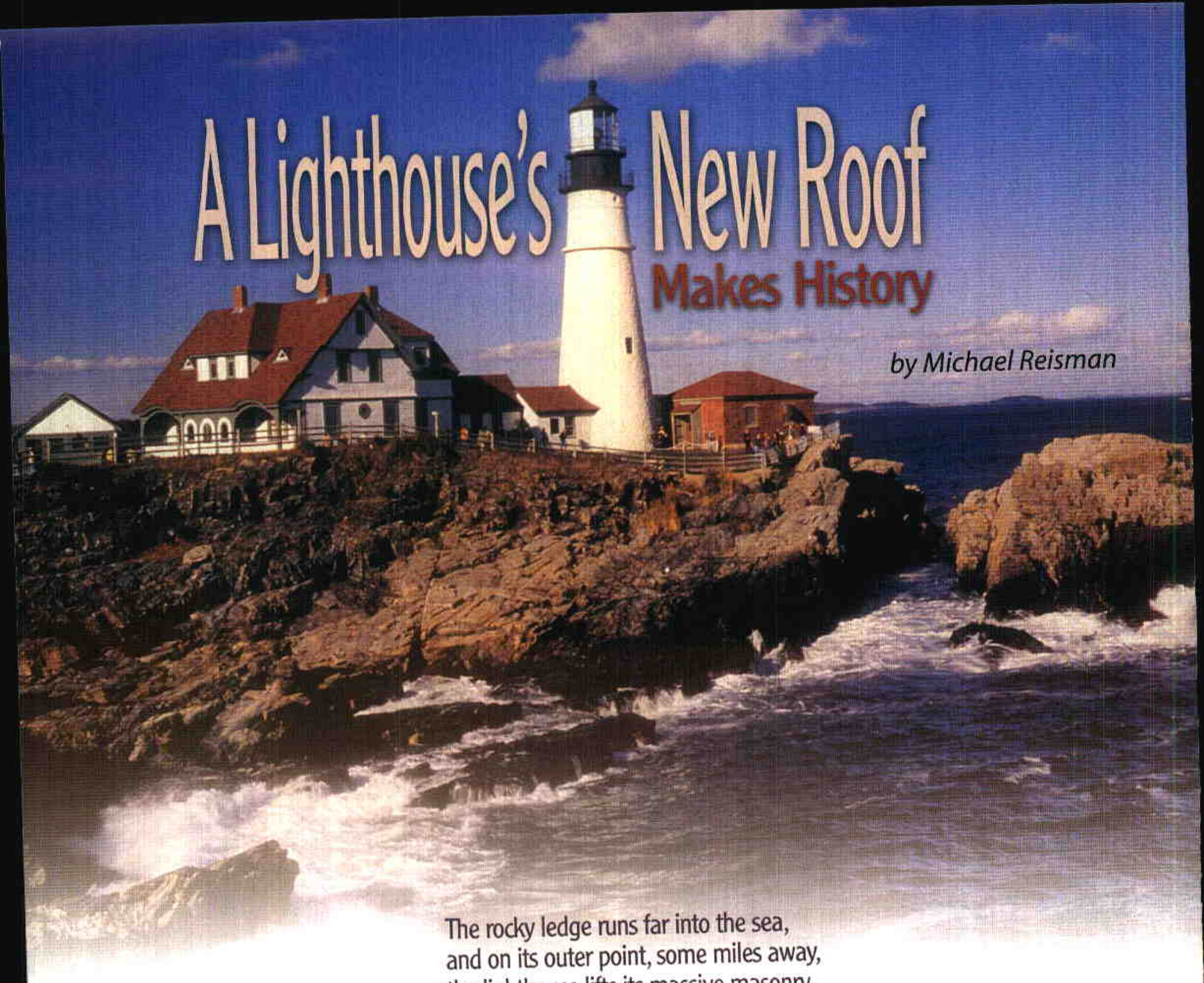
A Lighthouse's New Roof Makes History

by Michael Reisman



The rocky ledge runs far into the sea,
and on its outer point, some miles away,
the lighthouse lifts its massive masonry,
A pillar of fire by night, of cloud by day.

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Lighthouse"

Think Maine and you automatically picture sandy beaches, lobster boats, antique shops and old inns. And, of course, lighthouses. Maine boasts some 70 of them, most of which are still in operation. Rising from granite cliffs up and down Maine's spectacular coast, each one of these sentinels has a story to tell. But none quite like that of Portland Head Light.

The oldest lighthouse in the state, Portland Head Light has been guiding maritime traffic through the harbor since the end of the 18th century. As the country's first president, George Washington authorized its construction and, upon completion, appointed Revolutionary War veteran Captain Joseph Greenleaf to be the first keeper.

For 200 years now, the Portland Head Light has been standing watch over the town of Cape Elizabeth, not only leading seafarers to safety, but serving as an inspiration to thousands of storytellers, artists and writers. It was here that the beloved poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a native of Portland, penned his famous elegy, "The Lighthouse."

Given this extraordinary history, it is understandable that when Craig Cooper of Rainbow Construction Inc. got the to call in 1999 to replace the roof of the legendary lighthouse, a case of the jitters ensued.

"I mean, we're talking about one of the most photographed landmarks in the United States," Cooper says. "There is hardly a lighthouse calendar in the world that does not have a picture of Portland Head Light."

Ups and Downs

"What makes this lighthouse so unique is a combination of things," says Portland Head Light Director Cheryl Parker. "First, it's the oldest lighthouse in Maine, which appeals to historians. It



is also very accessible to the public, as there is nothing to obstruct their view of it. And it's so picturesque — the rocky coast, the red roof, the white tower — it's everyone's image of a lighthouse."

But, according to Parker, the lighthouse was not always this picture-perfect. At its completion in 1791, the lighthouse stood 72 feet. During the next 90 years, several alterations were made to accommodate improvements in lighthouse technology. In 1813, the tower was lowered by 25 feet. In 1864, 20 feet were added back on. In 1882, the 20 feet were once again removed. Within a year, the tower was raised yet again.

After that, the lighthouse changed little until 1958, when the old fresnel lens was removed and replaced with an airport-style revolving beacon. And, in 1992, the keeper's quarters were renovated and opened as a museum.

Then there was the matter of the deteriorating roof, which, by the time Rainbow Construction was called, was in desperate need of repair. The existing shingles were blowing off one by one — not a pretty sight for the busloads of visitors each day.

Laying the Groundwork

"We wanted a very basic red, three-tab shingle," says Michael McGovern, Cape Elizabeth town manager. "Most importantly, we wanted one that would stay in place for years to come."

Rainbow Construction recommended CertainTeed's Hatteras® Shingle, in Lighthouse Red, of course. Cooper explained to the council that the oversized 18-inch-by-36-inch shingle, with its unique color blends and deep shadow lines, would give the lighthouse roof an authentic appearance. In addition, the shingle utilizes an extra-heavy fiberglass base mat for added strength and tear resistance. Perhaps the most compelling feature is the shingle's 40-year limited warranty, including 10-year protection against winds up to 110 mph.

McGovern thought this choice was perfect for the tower. "Building codes have become more stringent in recent years because of severe weather along the coast," he says. "So, shingle durability meant a lot to us." McGovern was also very pleased with the outstanding warranty, which even offers coverage against algae growth.

Up on the Rooftop

Even for the experienced Rainbow Construction crew, working on Maine's most popular tourist attraction proved to be a challenge. They had to wait until after summer, the lighthouse's busiest season, to get started. Even then, they needed to keep the grounds of the tower as neat as possible, so all debris from construction had to be picked up immediately and carted off for disposal. But the main concern for the crew was to take extreme care in not damaging any of the structure's historical properties.

Rainbow Construction, in the remodeling and new custom home business since 1980, was up to the task. The company had tackled many big projects before this, and it was no stranger to the spotlight. A few years prior, Rainbow Construction had built Portland's world-renowned Bob Ludwig's Gateway Mastering Studio.

After carefully tearing off the existing shingles, the crew applied 65 squares of CertainTeed Hatteras. Because of the shingle's large size, Cooper said installation was faster than with standard three-tab shingles. Finally, copper flashings and drip edges were added for architectural and historical correctness.

"I was amazed at just how authentic it looked," says McGovern of the finished roof. Fortunately for the crew, fair weather prevailed during the project.

"We knew going in that the exposure was extreme and the winds could be severe," Cooper says. "But, we were lucky to have good conditions and completed the roof inside a week."

For many contractors, the Portland Head Light may have been just another roof to repair. For Craig Cooper, it was much more than that. It was a personal endeavor. "Since I was a kid in Portland, that lighthouse has been there for me," he says. "I often think of its historical greatness. I think of Washington. I think of Longfellow. I think of all the people over the years who have admired it for its sheer beauty."

With its new roof, Portland Head Light stands to represent the state of Maine for a long time to come. Cooper and the crew of Rainbow Construction can take pride in the fact that the fine work they accomplished on this important building is now literally a part of history. RC

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