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Castles of Light

The Lighthouses of Martha's Vineyard Stand Sentry

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Lighthouse historian Dennis Noble observed that lighthouses are America's answer to the castles of Europe. Like castles, lighthouses invariably create the same sense of wonder, intrigue, magic and mystery. They have a life and personality all their own.

In our minds they have a heart and soul. They evoke feelings of deep passion and strong local pride, as well as a strong sense of ownership in the people around them. As Mother Nature and human nature transform the Vineyard, the five lighthouses this Island harbors essentially remain unchanged. They are unwavering centerposts amidst the swirling, spiraling changes of time.

Despite their relative proximity to each other, each lighthouse has a very different story to tell. Volumes document the history of each lighthouse. The Historical Society's Lighthouse Committee is responsible for maintaining and restoring three of the five lighthouses: East Chop, Edgartown, and Gay Head. As Chair of that committee I am inclined to tell the stories of these three lighthouses from a perspective that is as much anecdotal as it is purely historical.

One of the few lucky people who actually lived at one of these "American castles" was Alice Purdy Ray. As she recalls in Linsey Lee's book, Vineyard Voices (published by the Historical Society), she, as a baby, moved with her mother and father, Captain George Purdy, who was appointed in 1912 as keeper of the East Chop Lighthouse after he had lost an arm in a boating accident.

Miss Purdy remembers the stillness and the solitude, prompted in part by the serene, treeless meadow that flowed from the lighthouse down to Crystal Lake. I remember being three, in 1950, when my great aunt rented the "Colossal Fossil," a beautiful rambling house on the bluff a quarter of a mile from the lighthouse. Pine and oak trees stood tall by then, but clearly I could see the lighthouse from my second floor bedroom window.

I was allowed to stay up until the light in the lighthouse went on. I did not realize at the time that by late August, I was being cheated out of at least one hour of playtime. Vegetation long since has consumed that vista.

While most of today's older generation will always think of the East Chop Lighthouse as a dark brown structure with a flashing green light, the lighthouse has endured numerous makeovers in its 125-year history. Its original fixed white light, beamed through a 4th-order Fresnel lens, was changed to flashing red in 1893, to fixed green in 1933 (when the light was automated and the keepers house demolished), to flashing green 30 years later. Meanwhile, its skin has changed color enough times in the century to suggest that it might be part chameleon. Its signature for years was its brown color - not pretty, but distinctive.

Originally painted white, the lighthouse underwent a color transition around 1890 when the Coast Guard for some reason decided to paint it maroon, leaving Captain Purdy subsequently to repaint the lighthouse annually with the plum color he had come to like. He got his own paint from Phillip's Hardware in Oak Bluffs. With automation of the light, the departure of Captain Purdy, and the unfortunate demolition of the keeper's house, one of two things happened.

Some members of the "Old Guard" say that the maroon paint oxidized to a dark brown, which the Coast Guard matched when it

again assumed painting responsibilities. Other people say that the Coast Guard supply officer inadvertently ordered the wrong color of paint which the work detail dutifully applied. In the early 1980s, the brown softened to a silky milk chocolate, which people enjoyed until 1988 when the Vineyard Environmental Research Institute (VERI), which had assumed a lease to maintain the structure three years earlier from the Coast Guard, gave it back its original white cloak.

White made the lighthouse more visible from the sea, while drastically reducing the huge condensation build-up that occurred inside on hot summer days when the brown color absorbed the sun's heat. The new coat redefined the lighthouse's image, leaving a few old-time East Choppers to reminisce and lament for years to come. This checkered brown and white past only heightens the lighthouse's intrigue and charm, and helps to make its story unique. I doubt that any other lighthouse can boast four different light configurations, and four different body colors in the course of its life.

With as many as 100 whaling ship captains calling Edgartown Harbor home in 1828, it was apparent to the people of this busy seaport that a navigational aid was necessary to help sailors negotiate the narrow channel. And so, on a man-made island one-eighth of a mile from shore at the entrance to the harbor, the U.S. Congress authorized, and the town built, the first Edgartown Lighthouse. Because the first keeper of the light often complained about having to row to and from the shore, a wooden footbridge was constructed a year later to ease his burden. In time, the footbridge became known as the Bridge of Sighs, where children, wives, and parents sadly waved goodbye to departing whalers who would be gone for many months, even years.

The keepers were reluctant to live in the lighthouse because regrettably, the building was of shabby construction - having been

done hastily by local builders - with deteriorating foundations and a constantly leaking roof created by the vibrations and shifting of the lantern room atop the building during major storms. The entire structure finally succumbed to the elements in the Hurricane of 1938.

In the following spring, the Coast Guard transported by barge the current cast iron lighthouse from Ipswich Harbor. It was identical in design to both the Nobska and East Chop Lights. They set it on an octagonal concrete foundation located on the original site. In the last half century, sand has filled in the area from the mainland to stretches beyond the man-made island, creating a permanent and prominent peninsula.

The predominant influx of fill came in September of 1954 during Hurricanes Carol and Hazel, when the storms created a massive shift of sand from the coastline north of the lighthouse. The amount of shells found in the sand suggests that much of this sand once sat on the ocean floor.

A granite stone perimeter, installed in 1841 to help support the building's deteriorating foundation, now supports the Children's Memorial which surrounds the lighthouse. In the late 1950s, I remember standing on the southeast wall of the perimeter and watching the sea lap at the base six feet below me. The top sections of granite visible today are just the tip of the stone iceberg.

A bell, mounted on the southeast side of the octagonal base and used as a navigational aid, was tagged an "attractive nuisance" since anyone could ring it at any time of the day or night, much to the utter consternation of nearby neighbors. As a favor to the Coast Guard, Lynn Murphy of Chilmark helped remove the bell in the mid-1960s. Believing it was destined for the lawn of the Historical Society, he was surprised to find it mounted as a showpiece at the Menemsha Coast Guard Station. About 15 years ago the bell was

transported through the Coast Guard station in Woods Hole to a place hereto unknown. Suspicion has it that it sits as a "trophy" on the lawn of one of the Coast Guard's "brass" somewhere in or near Boston. It seems only fair that it should be returned to the Vineyard and displayed as initially intended as an exhibit at the Historical Society.

Mounted on the lantern room wall was a foghorn, the guttural and repetitious sound of which also irritated the neighbors. VERI removed it in 1986 at the same time it converted the light power source to a solar panel that still provides today the energy used to illuminate the light.
On the far western end of Martha's Vineyard, the Gay Head Lighthouse stands sentry. Despite our regional loyalties that prompt and allow us to choose favorites, we all realize that this lighthouse is the gem of the Island. Its brick walls, four layers thick, and sandstone collar just below the lantern room, give it a stately air as it stands majestic on the cliffs of Aquinnah.

Built in 1856, the lighthouse looms as a primary figurehead in any discussions of our maritime heritage. It and its predecessor, commissioned in 1799 by President John Adams, have been of immeasurable value in aiding, and saving, many ships as they dodge Devil's Bridge on their journey through the western end of Vineyard Sound.

To the untrained eye, the structure appears to be a vision of strength and resilience. Close inspection, however, reveals a troubling problem. Through corrosion and rusting, the balcony surrounding the lantern room has pushed up slightly, allowing rainwater to drain, not away, but inward, where it seeps down through the layers of brick below. This moisture not only leaves dampness on the inner walls, but also, more seriously, freezes and expands during colder months adversely affecting the integrity of the structure.

As an aside, an engineering consultant recently noted the fine quality of the bricks, made at the Brickworks on the North shore with red clay taken from the cliffs on which the lighthouse stands. Thoughts of the bricks lead, also, to curiosity about the sandstone collar, the origin of which no one is quite sure.

The story of the Gay Head Lighthouse is really the story of its keepers. From the depths of an arduous, monotonous, and lonely job rose the flamboyant Sam Flanders. For an annual salary of $500, he was the keeper in 1856, when the prize of the new lighthouse, its 1st-Order Fresnel lens, was installed. Wanting to see this marvelous lens (which stands proudly today on the grounds of the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society in Edgartown), people came from far away, only to be regaled with outrageous stories conjured up in the mind of Mr. Flanders. Historian Art Railton described him as the Island's first true celebrity. And there was the forever-hospitable Charles Vanderhoop, the only Native American keeper at the light, who in the early 1900s guided and entertained more than three hundred thousand visitors, including an American president and a prominent movie star.

Life for some keepers and their families was not quite as upbeat. In 1890 logs show that keeper Atchison became seriously ill and had to resign. In 1892 keeper Edward Lowe died mysteriously at age 44 of a severe respiratory ailment.

Succeeding him was keeper Crocker, who, with his wife and six children, moved into the keeper's house, which was made of brick. Within a fifteen month period during 1896-97, four of his children died of unknown causes. By 1907 all six of his children, the oldest being 15, were dead. The Light Board suspected the culprit was mildew and growth on the dank inner walls of the keeper's brick house, so the dwelling was demolished in 1902 and replaced with a

Dutch colonial style wooden house, which was later demolished in the mid-1950s after the light was automated.

While the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society holds the current lease from the government to maintain and restore these three lighthouses, they hope someday soon to own them. To preserve them will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, money which, as yet the Society does not have. In an effort not only to serve the public, but also to help raise funds used for maintenance, the Society in the summer opens up the Gay Head Light for Friday - Sunday evening tours and the East Chop Light on Sunday evenings. For a small donation, one can not only feel both the excitement and the serenity of being "one" with the lighthouse, but also can enjoy, unquestionably, the best venue for watching a Vineyard sunset. The lighthouses, too, have become popular venues for weddings. As a photographer, I also can note that they are very photogenic. A "bad" picture of a lighthouse is seldom shot.

Lighthouses attract people much the way goldenrod along Moshup's Trail attracts Monarch butterflies on a sunny late-September afternoon. Seeing people standing on the balcony of any of the lighthouses creates an adrenal flow of anticipation and curiosity in people looking up from below.

Much to my surprise four summers ago, when I was with members of the Coast Guard inspecting the lantern room of the Edgartown Lighthouse, a middle-aged gentleman popped his head through the small opening in the lantern room floor. Realizing that we had left the opened door at the entrance unattended, and realizing, too, that this man had just traversed a 40-foot narrow and rusted ladder, I found my anxious retort to him filled with thoughts of liability. My anxiety only heightened when I realized that immediately below him, clinging to this steep vertical ladder, were his wife and three children.

Yes, lighthouses are irresistible.