Haunting voices out on Minot's Ledge

Ghost lore dates back to mid-1800s, when 1st lighthouse toppled

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SCITUATE

Lighthouse keepers never trusted the old Minot's Ledge Light.

It was state-of-the-art construction for 1850, an iron-pile tower whose supports were drilled directly into the surface of the most dangerous rocks around Boston Harbor. Government engineers thought that was the surest way to make the light a steady beacon for passing ships.

But every keeper who worked there dreaded the lonely, stormy nights, when howling winds and high, crashing waves made the light "reel like a drunken man," as first keeper Isaac Dunham wrote in his logbook.

His successor, John Bennett, was every bit as worried, and little more than a year after the light was first lit, his worst fears came to pass.

One night in April 1851, a huge storm hit the New England coast, causing flooding severe enough to turn Boston Neck into an island.

The lighthouse was last seen from Cohasset at about 10 p.m., already listing as the wind and water battered it. Three hours later, people in the town heard the lighthouse fog bell ring for the last time.

When dawn broke, the tower was gone. All but a few bent pilings had been swept into the sea.

Bennett was on shore throughout the storm. His young assistants, Joseph Antoine and Joseph Wilson, were in the lighthouse, and Bennett

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Photo courtesy of Dorothy Bicknell from the Collection of Edward Rowe Snow

This depiction, titled "The Iron Light House on Minot's Rock, Massachusetts Bay," is from an 1850s-era illustration from a newspaper or magazine story about the lighthouse.

Light keepers sometimes felt a ghostly presence

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knew they couldn't have survived the light's collapse. Their bodies and bits of their belongings were found later.

"A very sad story," says Jeremy D'Entremont, a Portsmouth, N.H., resident who gives lectures on New England lighthouses.

Sad, but not the end of the tale.

The light was finally replaced in 1860, with a granite tower that took a year and a half to build. In the decades that followed, the men who kept watch through the maddeningly slow hours discovered that perhaps they weren't alone.

One night, as D'Entremont tells it, one of two keepers in the lighthouse absentmindedly tapped his pipe several times on the table – and to his surprise, heard taps in reply. He tapped his pipe several more times and always got an answering tap.

He rang the bell for his fellow keeper and asked if he'd done the tapping. The keeper said he hadn't, that he'd been asleep.

Then both men remembered being told that, in the original lighthouse, Wilson and Antoine sometimes communicated by tapping on a stovepipe that ran between floors.

And then there was the spectral figure on the new lighthouse's ladder, and the call that sailors thought they could hear over the gales and the sounds of rough water: "Afastar-se!"

Immigrant fishermen translated the phrase. It means "Stay away!" in Portuguese, Antoine's native language.

D'Entremont hasn't experienced such visitations on any of his lighthouse trips, but he says he's heard too many stories from too many lights to discount them as mere superstition.

"Lighthouse keepers were very attached to the places where they worked," he said, "and they're such isolated places. They beg for a ghost, for the spirit of someone who feels that they need to be there."

Minot's Ledge Lighthouse was automated in 1947. With no resident keepers there, reports of noises and watery voices have grown ever more rare. Old-timers like Scituate fisherman Francis Litchfield haven't seen or heard anything themselves in all their nights out around the light, either.

But they know the tradition and won't be surprised if some foggy day they pick up the wafting strain of voices that seem to be saying "Afastar-se!"

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