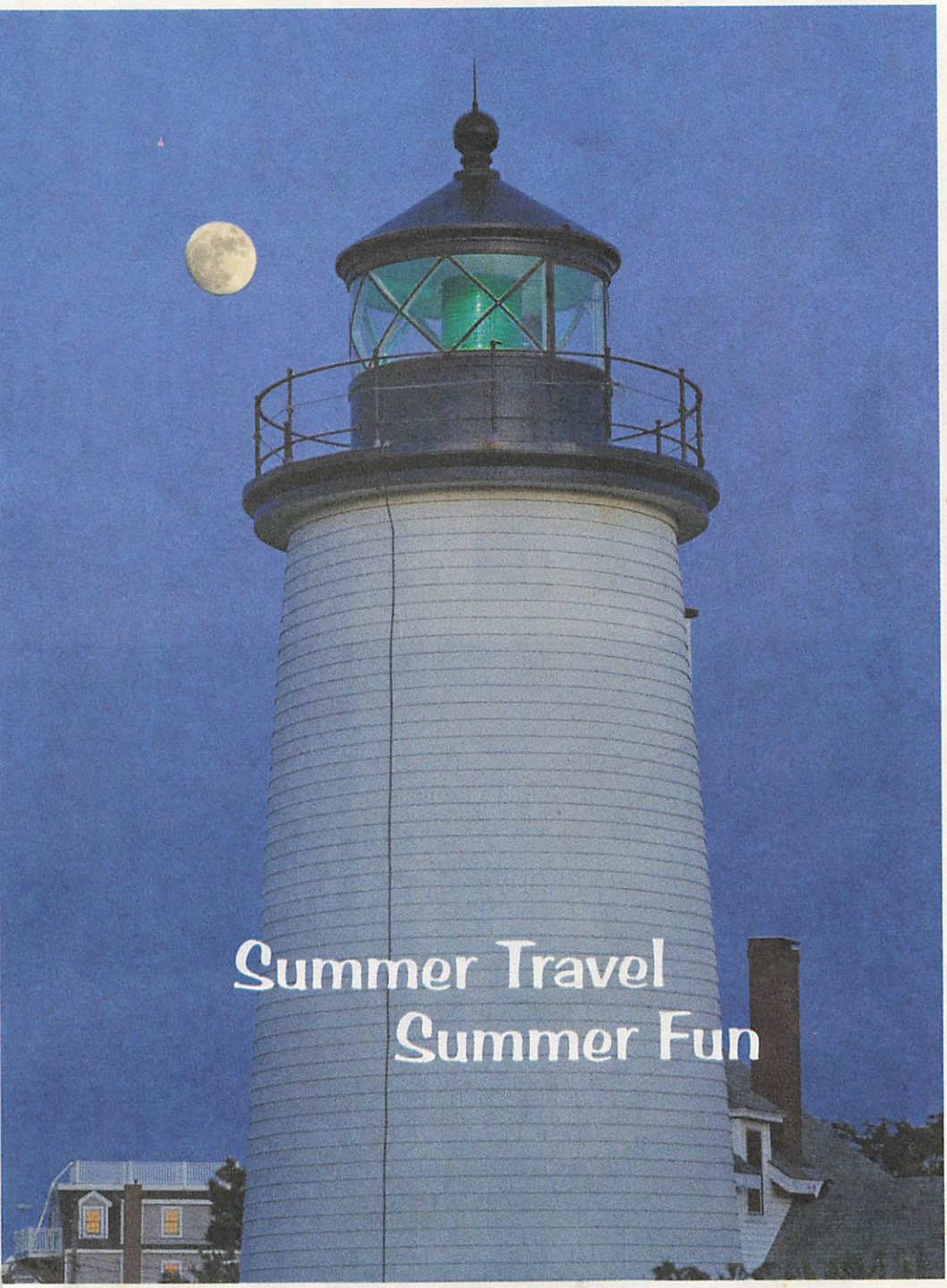
VALLEY NEWS

AAA MERRIMACK VALLEY

Volume 44
July/August 2007



A Closer View of the History Behind Plum Island Light

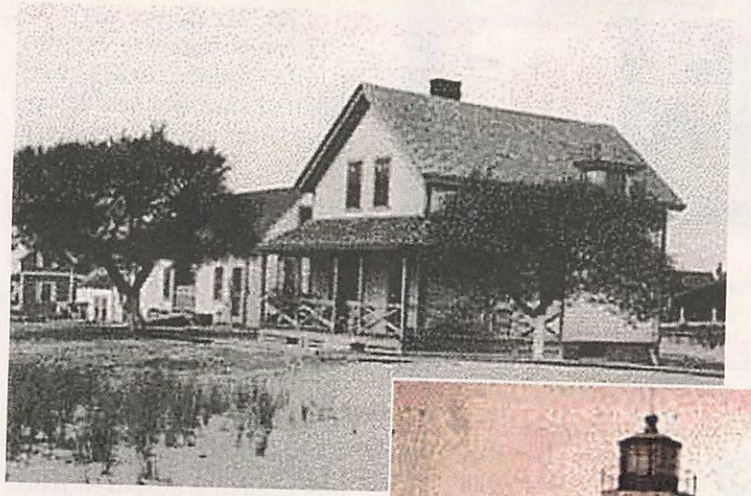
By the close of the 18th century Newburyport, located at the top of the Massachusetts coastline, was an important seaport. However, its location at the mouth of the Merrimack River proved challenging. Navigating the shifting channels was a dangerous proposition for the most experienced seaman.

Local mariners first built fires on the beaches of Plum Island and lit torches as visual guides to aid merchant ships as they entered the river. This technique soon proved inadequate and in 1787 the General Court of Massachusetts authorized the building of "two small wooden lighthouses on the north end of Plumb Island".

The original towers were built on movable foundations to facilitate any necessary change of position as the sandbars around Plum Island were known to shift. The towers served as "range lights" used by mariners sailing toward Newburyport. The two lights could be "lined up" in the sights of a skilled navigator and used as a guide to the best channel into the harbor.

Local merchants initially financed the construction of the lighthouses and in 1790 the buildings were ceded to the federal government. President George Washington appointed Abner Lowell keeper. Subsequently, three generations of the Lowell family would serve in the same capacity.

The wild and unpredictable New England weather took an ongoing toll on the structures but catastrophic damage was caused in May 1808 when a violent tornado knocked both lighthouses to the ground. Congress appropriated $10,000 in February 1809 and the towers were soon rebuilt. By July 1838 the towers were again in need of repair and Congress appropriated a sum of $4,000 for "rebuilding" the lighthouses. It seems that the towers were not rebuilt but perhaps merely repaired since only $950.44 of the money appropri-



The friends of Plum Island Light are offering tours and cruises this summer.



sive work contributed by the Coast Guard in 1994. Those improvements included replacement of all lantern glass, repainting of the tower, new drains around the lighthouse and a new oak door as well as a new exterior storm door.

Today, while the structure is owned by the City of Newburyport, The Friends of Plum Island Light care for and maintain the lighthouse under a lease agreement with the city.

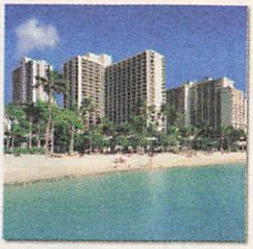
Vintage photos and all historical information about the Plum Island Light are courtesy of local historian and author Jeremy D'Entremont. For more information on Plum

Pleasant Holidays



Escape to Hawaii with Pleasant Holidays!

OAHU
Waikiki Beach Marriott Resort & Spa $1155
Includes 4th night FREE & daily buffet breakfast for two


Waikiki Beach Marriott Resort & Spa

HAWAII'S BIG ISLAND
Waikoloa Beach Marriott Resort & Spa $1389
Includes 4th night FREE & daily buffet breakfast for two

AAA Member benefit:
$30 per person activity voucher


Waikoloa Beach Marriott Resort & Spa

Marriott.

VACATIONS INCLUDE: • Round-trip airfare, • 5 days accommodations • Fresh flower lei greeting • Round-trip transfers on Oahu or daily Dollar Rent A Car on Hawaii's Big Island • All hotel & car rental taxes & more!

Pleasant Holidays.
Capturing your dreams. Creating memories.

BOS Departures. Rates shown are per person, based on double occupancy for select travel 9/6-12/6/07. Call for other travel dates. Rates & inclusions are subject to change, holiday/seasonal supplements, blackout dates, availability & any restrictions. Rates shown include Hawaii ticket tax but do not include transportation tax of $15, PFC up to $18, per segment tax of $3.40 and up to $10 in September 11th Secutiry Fees. CST #1007939-10.

ated was actually spent. More evidence of this is found in remarks made by Lightkeeper Phineas George who complained in 1842 that the towers and lanterns were leaky. In his 1843 report, Lewis called both towers "dilapidated, decayed, leaky, and out of position."

By 1855, a strange looking small tower called the "Bug Light" was added. Unfortunately, the following year one of the main lighthouses was destroyed by fire and it was decided not to rebuild the structure. However, the surviving lighthouse received a fourth order Fresnel lens. At the time the lens was state-of-the-art equipment invented in France by Augustin Fresnel.

Over the years, the shifting sands of Plum Island left the remaining tower and the "Bug" too far inland. The on-going natural occurrence necessitated several moves between 1870 and 1882. In 1898 a new wooden lighthouse was built next to the old one and the Fresnel lens was transferred to the new lighthouse. This most recently constructed tower is the remaining building that can presently be seen on the north end of Plum Island. It was first lighted on September 20, 1898 using kerosene as fuel which eventually was replaced with electricity in 1927. In 1951 the light was automated and then changed to flashing green in 1981.

Further modernizations

Friends of Plum Island Light

2007 Tower and Cruise Schedule

The Newburyport Harbor Light, Plum Island Point will be open on the following days, weather permitting:

Sunday

July 8 & 22
August 19
September 2, 16, & 30
October 7

Saturday

August 4

Sneakers are required. There is a short ladder to climb. There is a 42" height requirement for small children and an age requirement of 5 years. There is no fee, but donations are appreciated.

Dinner Cruise

Sunday, July 15, 5:30 pm to 9:30 pm from Captain's Fishing Docks at Plum Island Point to the Isles of Shoals.

Upon arrival at the Shoals, we will go ashore, walk the paths to the monuments and chapel, and visit the hotel and gift shop, while stepping back in time to the grand era when the Shoals was a famous art colony and fishing village. Returning to the *Captain's Lady,* we'll watch the sunset over White Island Lighthouse and feast on grilled steak tips, shrimp, salad and pasta topped off with strawberry shortcake. Price is $45.

Day Cruise North

Sunday, August 12, 9 am to 5 pm from Captain's Fishing Docks, Plum Island Point.

The trip north will take us out to the Isles of Shoals, Boon Island; Nubble Light at Cape Neddick, ME; south to Whale Back Light, Portsmouth Harbor; and Fort Henry. Then south to Newburyport Harbor Light and past Newburyport's waterfront. The galley will be open all day, picnic lunches welcome. Price is $45

Both cruises will be narrated by Jeremy D'Entremont, local historian and author. Please call Barbara Kezer at 978-462-4770 for reservations. Don't miss the boat!