



COMMUNITY

Wood Island lighthouse bicenntenial - 200 years of faithful watch

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BIDDEFORD (July 7, 2008): At 200 years old, Wood Island lighthouse off Biddeford Pool has seen its share of lighthouse keepers, shipwrecks and storms. It also has its share of ghost stories attached to it.

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The Wood Island lighthouse as it looks today. (Photo by Harmony Motter)

In 1808, Thomas Jefferson commissioned the construction of the lighthouse, which can be seen from Old Orchard Beach, Ferry Beach in Saco and Biddeford Pool. At the time it was built, the Wood Island lighthouse was only the 13th lighthouse in the United States.

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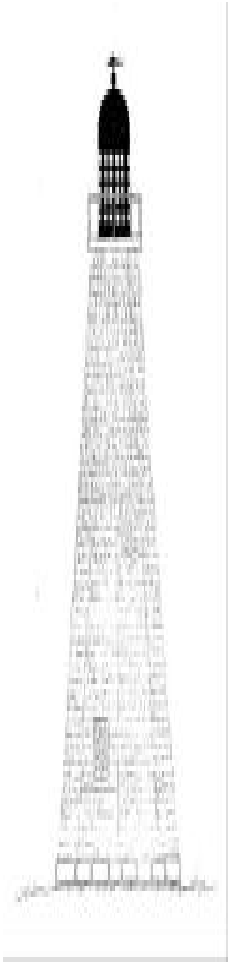
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• 1808 – Wood Island Lighthouse commissioned by Thomas Jefferson. The total cost was $5,100 and the lighthouse was built of wood.



(Image courtesy of Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse)

• 1839 – The lighthouse tower was rebuilt using granite.

• 1857 – A new light keeper's house was constructed.

• 1865 – On March 16 light keeper Ebenezer Emerson was key in saving the lives of the crew of the Canadian brig the "Edyth Ann." With the help of a local fisherman living on the island, Emerson was able to save the entire crew. He later received a pair of brass binoculars from the British government in honor of his heroic efforts.

• 1868 – Boathouse and landing slip built on the western end of the island.

• 1872 – The first fog bell was commissioned and cast in Sheffield, England, by Wickers, Sons & Co. The bell weighed 1,315 pounds.



(Image courtesy of Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse)

• 1872 – Christmas Eve of 1872 was a bad day for ships – three different ships struck the island that day. Two of them – the American schooners "Smith Tuttle" and the "Virginia" – ran aground, but were safely lifted off the rocks when high tide returned. The "Intrepid" was not so lucky. Although her entire crew was saved, the ship was a total loss after striking the outer reef off Wood Island.

• 1886 – Thomas Henry Orcutt, who served as light keeper for 19 years, begins duty. His dog Sailor became famous for using his teeth to ring the fog bell to salute vessels that sounded their whistle or bell as they came close to the island.



(Image courtesy of Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse)

• 1887 – The American schooner the "Western Light," was wrecked. It was carrying a cargo of household goods that washed ashore. Many of the items were picked up and taken home by the residents of Biddeford Pool.

• 1887 – The schooner the "Cora Van Gilder" ran aground on the rocks near Biddeford Pool. The captain's wife had smallpox and she was taken to Wood

Island, where the light keeper's family cared for her. She eventually recovered and no one else became ill.

• 1906 – The light keeper's house was significantly remodeled. A second story, with raised dormers, was added.



(Image courtesy of Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse)

• 1906 – In November, the American schooner "Marshall Perrin" wrecked on Wood Island. Although the rest of the crew was saved, the captain and the cook lost their lives.

• 1909 – In July, a gas-powered pleasure boat called "The Item," capsized near Wood Island. There were 31 passengers on board; two women drowned.

• 1939 – The U.S. Coast Guard replaces the U.S. Lighthouse Service, which up until this time, in various forms, had been responsible for all lighthouses across the country.



(Photo by Harmony Motter)

• 1958 – The lighthouse gets its first electric light. A generator powered the light.

• 1963 – Electricity was brought out to the island by underwater cable.

• 1965 – The lantern room was removed from the top of the lighthouse and a rotating airport beacon was installed.

• 1967 – A modern foghorn replaces the old fog bell.

• 1978 – 28 acres of the island's total 35 acres are deeded over to the Maine Audubon Society.



(Photo by Harmony Motter)

• 1986 – A new lantern room (cupola) is delivered to the island and placed atop the lighthouse by helicopter.

• 1986 – Light is automated and the last light keeper – Merton Perry – is sent home.

• 1992 – The lighthouse is placed on Lighthouse Digest's doomsday list.

• 2003 – The Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse is formed. The group's mission is to restore and preserve the lighthouse, document and preserve its history, and foster community appreciation for it through public access and education.

• 2004 – The friends group first starts offering tours of the island.



(Photo by Harmony Motter)

• 2005 – The New England Ghost Project investigates the lighthouse for paranormal activity. The group claims to have met several ghosts.

Facts & Figures

• ½ mile – Length of raised boardwalk built between the boathouse on the western end of the island and the lighthouse on the eastern end of the island.

• 1 – Number of Web cams on the island. Recently a Web cam was installed on the top of the flag pole at Wood Island by the Gulf of Maine Ocean Observing System.

• 3 – The number of diesel tanks on the island. Before electricity was brought to the island in 1963, the electric lantern ran on a generator. Three, 2,000-gallon tanks of diesel fuel were installed to make sure the generator never ran dry.

• 3 Years – Typical tour of duty for lighthouse keepers in the U.S. Coast Guard.

• 16 – Length measured in feet of the Pea Pod boat the Coast Guard provided for the use of lighthouse keepers.

• 19 – The longest number of years served by a light keeper on the island. The honor goes to Thomas Henry Orcutt, whose term spanned from 1886 to 1905.

• 36 - The number of light keepers. The first keeper was Benjamin Cole in 1808. The last keeper was Merton Perry who left the island in 1986 when the lighthouse became automated.

• 45 – The height of the lighthouse in feet

• 60 – Total number of stairs leading from the bottom of the lighthouse to the lantern room.

• 300 – Depth in feet of the artisan well that supplies water to the light keeper's house.

• Nearly 300 – Number of members belonging to the Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse.

• 1,000 – The wattage of the bulbs in the lighthouse lantern when Cliff Trebilcock was the light keeper in the early 1970s.

Murder-suicide big news in 1896

On June 1, 1896, Howard Hobbs, a fisherman who lived on Wood Island killed his landlord, Fred Milliken, who was also a local game warden and lobsterman.

Milliken owned two buildings on the southern end of Wood Island. He lived in one of them with his family and rented the other building to Hobbs and another fisherman named William Moses.

According to an account in the June 2, 1896, issue of the Biddeford Daily Journal, Hobbs and Moses had spent a good part of the day of June 1 in Old Orchard Beach, where the two apparently met with a friend and got drunk.

A York County sheriff's deputy threatened to lock them up, but the men begged to be let go. After leaving Old Orchard Beach, Hobbs and Moses walked back to Camp Ellis in Saco, where they had left their boat.

On the way back to Wood Island, the men stopped at Hills Beach in Biddeford and, according to the newspaper article, may have done some more drinking. When they reached the island, Milliken and his stepson were working near the landing place.

When the men passed by, Milliken asked to speak to Hobbs, but Hobbs did not stop. Milliken followed the pair as far as his own house, where he donned his vest and badge.

Meanwhile, Hobbs and Moses had gone to their shanty, where Hobbs picked up his 42-caliber repeating rifle. Hobbs told Moses he was going to see Milliken, and Moses urged him to leave his rifle behind.

According to the newspaper report, Hobbs told Moses he wanted his rifle along in case he saw any birds to shoot at. They met Milliken near his garden gate, at which point he asked Hobbs if the gun was loaded.

Hobbs said it wasn't loaded. Milliken then approached and said, "I'll see whether it's loaded or not." At that, Hobbs leveled the rifle and fired at Milliken point blank.

Milliken did not die immediately. His wife, whose name does not appear in the newspaper account, dispatched Moses and her son to Biddeford Pool to get a doctor. Meanwhile, Hobbs tried to assist Milliken, but when Milliken's wife tried to get the gun away from him he threatened her too.

So, she urged him to leave her and go tell the lighthouse keeper – Thomas Orcutt – what had happened. Hobbs agreed, found Orcutt and told him the

whole story.

According to the newspaper account, Orcutt then returned to the Milliken house with Hobbs, but it was too late. Milliken was already dead.

Hobbs then left the Milliken home, but before he did he told Milliken's wife that he would put a bullet through his own temple. The Milliken children heard a shot a short while later, but no one dared venture near Hobbs' home.

Moses came back to the island after summoning the doctor. When he returned to the home he shared with Hobbs, he found Hobbs dead with two notes laying on a bedside table. One was to Moses, and the other was to a girl in Biddeford Pool whom Hobbs had been courting.

The only motive for the shooting that could be discovered is that Hobbs rarely paid his rent and Milliken had told Hobbs and Moses to be off the island by June 1.

Ghost stories

In the fall of 2005, the Friends of Wood Island Light invited a crew from the New England Ghost Project to spend a night on the island to see if the lighthouse was haunted.

The team included Ron Kolek, who heads the ghost project; Maureen Wood, a psychic and medium; and Leo Moffett, an infrared photographer.

The team decided the island is definitely haunted. Kolek said during their night on the island they had several encounters with ghosts. The first encounter was with a male ghost on the stairs in the lighthouse tower.

Wood said the man was trying to express sorrow over something, but he wouldn’t say what. The team then met another ghost on the stairs. This time it was a female who was sobbing, but who wouldn’t talk.

While walking on the boardwalk that leads from the boathouse to the lighthouse, Kolek said the group encountered a third ghost, or spirit. Wood said the spirit tried to enter her body and on the third attempt the spirit caused Wood to drop to her knees and begin crawling along as if injured.

While the ghost hunting team knew about the murder-suicide in 1896, Kolek said the group was much more interested in the untold stories the ghosts could reveal.

One keeper’s story

Cliff Trebilcock was the light keeper on Wood Island from 1970 to 1972. He remembered digging his own garden, repainting the lighthouse, sleeping in the room that faced directly onto the lighthouse.

When asked if he’d ever encountered a ghost or ghosts during his two years on the island, Trebilcock said he never had anything “questionable happen.”



Cliff Trebilcock was the lighthouse keeper at Wood Island from 1970 to 1972. (Photo by Harmony Motter)

But Trebilcock does remember several big storms. During one such Nor'easter, one of his sons became ill and needed penicillin. However, the Coast Guard would not venture out in the storm. So, Trebilcock called a local lobsterman he knew to see if he would be willing to bring his son the needed medicine.

The lobsterman agreed and went to the pharmacy to pick up the prescription. He then put the medicine in a plastic peanut butter jar so it wouldn't get wet.

When the lobsterman reached the island, he couldn't land because it was too dangerous with the high waves, wind and rain. So he floated the peanut butter jar as close to shore as he could using a life ring.

Trebilcock remembers standing on the shore and using a boat hook to try and catch the life ring. It took several times, but he was finally successful.

Despite the electricity going out all the time, the barrenness of the island and only being allowed off one weekend a month, Trebilcock said he'd be happy to come back and keep the light any time.

In fact, he and his new wife, Linda, were married out on the island last summer. Trebilcock lost his first wife to cancer and met Linda online. The two hit it off immediately and were married within less than a year of meeting.

Linda said she and her husband "don't need the television, or radio or phones." She added that island life is great because it's "peaceful and quiet."

A Closer Look

• Wood Island tours

July 5-Aug. 30

Wednesday: 4:30 and 5:30 p.m.
Thursday: 5 and 6 p.m.
Saturday: 1 and 2 p.m.

Call 286-3229, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday through Friday to make reservations.

• "Capture the Coast" auction

When: Sunday, July 13
Time: 4-7 p.m.
Where: Nonantum Resort
95 Ocean Ave., Kennebunkport
Tickets: $25 per person
For more information: Call 284-9807

• For more information on the Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse go online to www.woodislandlighthouse.org or send a letter to P.O. Box 26 Biddeford Pool, ME 04006.

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