

A New Chapter for Falmouth's Light

by Marina Davalos | Photography by Albie DiBenedetto

"There's something magical about lighthouses," says Falmouth resident Jeff Thomas. He should know; he's been leading tours at **Nobska Lighthouse** since 1994–first as a member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary and currently as tour and volunteer manager for the Friends of Nobska Light(http://www.friendsofnobska.org/), a nonprofit which was officially formed in February 2015. Its mission: preserving Nobska Light Station. The need for such an organization arose in 2013.

From 1985 until 2013, the lightkeepers' houses on the Nobska property were used as housing for Coast Guard Commanders and their families, and changed occupancy every three years or so. But by 2013, it became apparent to the Coast Guard that the houses and the lighthouse tower were in need of costly repairs and would no longer be suitable as living quarters. The property was thus abandoned, with only Coast Guard Auxiliary members designated as lightkeepers coming on and off the property to perform basic maintenance.

That was when the members of the Falmouth Historical Society, the Woods Hole Historical Museum(http://www.woodsholemuseum.org/) Highfield Hall & Gardens(http://www.highfieldhallandgardens.org/), and the Woods Hole Community Association(http://www.woodsholecommunityassociation.org/) joined forces. Under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of



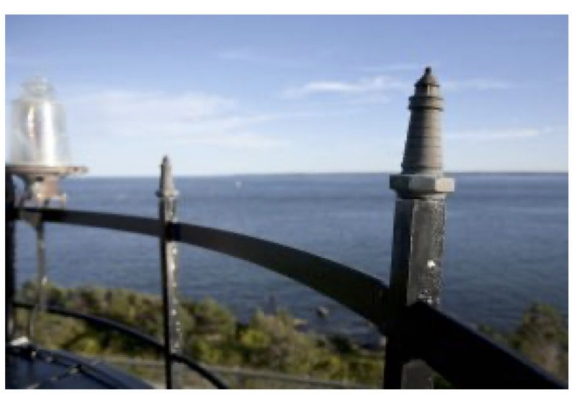
The cast iron tower, lined by brick inside, replaced the old wooden structure in 1876.



Jeff Thomas has been leading tours at Nobska Lighthouse sinc 1994.

2000(https://www.nps.gov/maritime/nhlpa/intro.htm), when federally owned lighthouses listed on the National Register of Historic Places, such as Nobska, are in need of repairs that are too costly or excessive for the Coast Guard to maintain, the caretaking of these structures can be transferred to the hands of another agency such as a museum or a nonprofit, according to the National Park Service. "All four organizations had a meeting with the public to decide what to do," says Catherine Bumpus, executive director of Friends. "The public decided that the community should take on Nobska. There was just this feeling that we needed to." However, the project of taking on Nobska was too big and too diversionary for any one of the organizations to take on single-handedly, adds Bumpus. So members from all four organizations came together and formed Friends of Nobska Light.

On March 7, 2016, the Coast Guard granted a license to the Town of Falmouth for maintaining the four-acre property, including the tower and the lightkeeper's quarters. In a ceremony on April 25, 2016, the Coast Guard officially handed over the keys to Friends, who will maintain and restore the property. Bumpus estimates that to begin with, Friends will need to raise $800,000 for repairs, which will include installing 41 new windows and a new heating system. Plans are in the works to turn the property – tower and lightkeeper's quarters into a high-tech maritime museum by 2020. The museum will include automated, interpretative graphics with touch-screen swiping, where visitors can take a virtual tour of Nobska's history.



Nobska is one of only 3 lights in the country adorned with lighthouse-shaped finials.

The lighthouse at Nobska was first built in 1829. According to documents at the Woods Hole Historical Museum, the four acres on which it's situated belonged to two families, the Davises and the Lawrences. The land was conveyed to the government in 1822 for purposes of building a lighthouse, for the total sum of $160.00. The first structure was of wood, but in 1876 it was replaced by the iron tower that stands today. Originally painted in a brick-red color, the structure was built in Chelsea, MA, and stands 40 feet tall, made of cast iron on the outside and lined with brick on the inside. Civilian lightkeepers lived on the property in those days, lighting the way for seafaring mariners coming in and out of Great Harbor.

The longest stay of any civilian lightkeeper was that of Oliver Airey Nickerson, lightkeeper from 1874 until his death in 1911. The



The spiral staircase inside the tower.



The Friends of Nobska Light gather in the former lightkeeper's quarters to discuss future repairs. From left: Brian Nickerson, Barbara Meissner, Jeff Thomas, Susan Shephard and Denise Thomas.

light in his day was lit by sperm whale oil, later replaced by kerosene in the 1870s. It shone onto a lens known as a Fresnel lens, specifically designed for lighthouses by French physicist Augustin-Jean Fresnel in 1825, according to the U.S. Lighthouse Society. In 1888, the Fresnel lens was upgraded from a level 5 order lens to a stronger, more powerful level 4 Fresnel–the lens is still in the lighthouse today. Egg-shaped and about two feet tall, it is made of stepped glass, which converts a light source into a beam. Shining the light wasn't the only responsibility of the lightkeeper back then, however.



Brian Nickerson, president of the Friends of Nobska Light, in front of the keepers' quarters.

According to Brian Nickerson, president of Friends and a distant relative of Oliver Airey Nickerson, Oliver Airey's daughter, Florence played an important role—it was her task to count and track the ships coming in and out of Great Harbor. "Family was expected to work together," Brian says. It is said that an estimate 10,000 ships would pass through each year. Nobska was one of si lighthouses visible from boats on the Vineyard Sound, according to Jeff Thomas. "In the 1800s, this was the second busiest passage, because of whaling, second only to the English Channel," he adds. In 1919, electricity came to Cape Cod. Kerosene lamps were replaced with a 150-watt bulb and Nobska became electrified.

Civilian lightkeepers and their families continued to live at Nobska until 1985, when the Coast Guard Sector Southeastern New England took over the premises and began using Nobska as housing for commanders and their families. The Coast Guard Auxiliary became the new lightkeepers in 1994, keeping up basic maintenance and giving tours of the premises to the public. Jeff Thomas has been a tour guide since then, rendering him the last lightkeeper of Nobska. He says he's grateful he can keep giving tours with Friends. "I love sharing it with people. It's very comforting to be able to do that." In 2013, after deeming the property unlivable, the Coast Guard ceased giving tours to the public.



In 1888, the Fresnel lens was upgraded to a stronger, more powerful level 4 Fresnel, which is still in the lighthouse today.



Vineyard Sound.

"It sat vacant from 2013 until the spring of 2016," says Barbara Meissner, chair of the development committee for Friends. The former president of Highfield Hall, Meissner's role is to create strategies for fundraising and raising awareness in the community. She says she is thrilled to be a part of Friends and to be leading tours herself, which are free and open to the public. "Most people who come here have never been here before, and there is so much energy going on here: the wind, the water, the waves and the boats. The ferries and the fishing boats, you get to know them as friends. It's always a such fun thing seeing people here for their first time and watching them become mesmerized by the beauty here." Meissner adds that the group is in the process of planning events to raise awareness, and they encourage people who love Nobska to join in the volunteer effort.

The Falmouth Chamber of Commerce(http://www.falmouthchamber.com/) has had an active role in the formation of Friends, according to Chamber president and CEO Michael Kasparian, a Falmouth resident of 12 years. "The Friends represents a great group of individuals. Nobska is our logo, it's our symbol. It represents Falmouth and our maritime history, and the Friends represents a really dedicated group of people."



A portion of the lighthouse keeper's quarters.