A Fascinating Story: Cape Cod's Three Sisters Lighthouses

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Foundation of the Center 'Sister' Lighthouse courtesy of the National Parks Service

Lighthouses are as much a part of Cape Cod's history and allure as its miles of beaches, quaint villages, and fabulous shops. There are eighteen lighthouses on Cape Cod. Some of them are more universally known, such as Chatham Light, Nauset Light, Race Point Light, Highland Light, and Nobska Light. There are a few lesser known like Cleveland Ledge Light, Wings Neck Light, and Point Gammon Light, yet all of the structures have one common thread, they are located on the water. However there are three lighthouses in Eastham that are not even within sight of water. In fact they sit quietly in a field on Cable Road more than 1,800-feet from the ocean. These are the Three Sisters Lighthouses and their story is one of the most fascinating in Cape Cod history. It is a story that is still going on to this day.

The history of these structures begins nearly 200-years ago when the Town of Eastham petitioned to have a beacon built along the shore to protect passing vessels after there had been so many shipwrecks. The proposal was approved in 1836 with work being completed in 1838. However instead of there being one lighthouse it was decided that there would be three. The reason for the

three was to help vessels differentiate the Eastham lights from the single Highland Light to the north in Truro, and the twin lights of Chatham to the south. The fifteen-foot tall brick structures were constructed by local builder Winslow Lewis and his team who had put in the lowest bid.

The three towers soon gained the 'Three Sisters' nickname. Legend has it that vessels passing by remarked that they resembled three ladies in white dresses wearing black hats. The lighthouses did their job for decades until shoreline erosion threatened them. Today when a lighthouse is threatened measures are taken to save them by moving them safely away from the eroding cliffs. In the late 1800's though the three brick towers were simply allowed to succumb to nature and fall into the sea. They were replaced in 1892 by three new 'Sisters' standing twenty-two feet tall and 150-feet apart. These new wooden towers with brick foundations were positioned thirty-feet back from where the original towers had fallen.





Chatham Light. On the right side covered by an anchor is the foundation of the other lighthouse which once stood there, that's the one that got moved to Eastham and is present day Nauset Light. Photo by Chris Setterlund.

The relentless hand of nature continued to eat away at the cliffs of present day Nauset Light Beach. In less than twenty-years the shoreline had eroded to the point that it was within eight-feet of one of the towers. It was decided in 1911 that the Three Sisters would be decommissioned. Only the center tower would remain as a solo beacon attached to the lighthouse keeper's house. The two discontinued lights were sold to Helen Cummings in 1918 for $3.50. They would be moved in 1920 to Cable Road after some repairs, joined together by a room, and renamed the 'Twin Lights Cottage.'

The career of the remaining Sister along the shore was short-lived. By 1923 it has also fallen into disrepair. Rather than fixing it up it was decided that it would be decommissioned and replaced. It would be sold to Albert Hall for $10 and turned into a cottage much like the other two Sisters.

A perfect substitute to take the reins of protecting Eastham's coastal waters sat thirteen miles to the south in Chatham. It was there at the Coast Guard Station where another recently decommissioned lighthouse, one of the Chatham Twin Lights, resided. The forty-eight foot tall cast iron tower would be moved to Eastham and the top third would be painted red. Nauset Lighthouse was born.

In 1965 the Twin Lights Cottage on Cable Road would be purchased by the National Park Service. Ten years later, in 1975, the center tower, which had also been turned into a cottage, was purchased by the NPS. It would be reunited with its other Sisters, being placed in its former spot between them.



View of the Three Sisters as they appear today. Photo by Chris Setterlund.

Recently the Three Sisters caused a bit of a stir along the shore. It is just off Nauset Light Beach that a circular brick foundation was unearthed by the waves. When the tide is low enough one can walk right out and touch it. Bill Burke, Cultural Resources Program Manager at the Cape Cod National Seashore, has the answer as to which lighthouse this foundation is from.
"It is likely the foundation of the "Beacon"," Burke says, "the center tower of the second set of towers, which were wooden but had brick bases." This is not the first time though that the foundation has been exposed by the elements. Burke was also kind enough to share a photo of the foundation after it had been exposed in 1999.

Lighthouses are a part of the fabric of Cape Cod and have been for centuries. Some have simple stories, some have complex stories, it is likely though that none have a story as unique as that of the Three Sisters. Visit the second set of towers on Cable Road in Eastham and then take a drive to Nauset Light Beach at low tide to gaze upon the foundation of the center tower before the elements cover it back up.

By Chris Setterlund