# An old cast iron tower, a beacon of light are the stars of the show on the craggy edge of the Atlantic Ocean

## An emblem of New England still shines a light in the darkness to lead us

**By** Thomas Farragher Globe Columnist, Updated October 4, 2020, 5:14 p.m.



Robert Apse, who is documenting efforts toward lighthouse preservation in New England, sat near Marblehead Light. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

MARBLEHEAD — The old cast iron tower stands as it has for 125 years on the craggy edge of this historic harbor, flashing its beacon of hope and safety, an encouraging ray of light that stretches across the harbor and into the open Atlantic.

It's a friendly sentinel that never surrenders its duty.

Underneath the 105-foot-tall historic lighthouse, an old man in a blue windbreaker walks his dog. A young couple, toddler in tow, holds the little blond boy by his hands, guiding him through his first

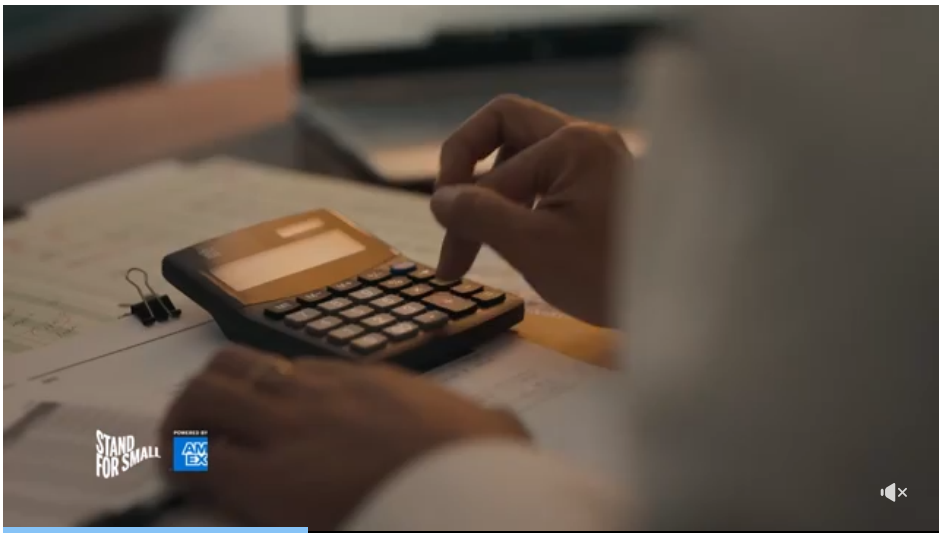
young couple, toddler in tow, holds the little blond boy by his hands, guiding him through his first tentative steps at the edge of a darkening sea.

And in the near distance, seagulls soar, adrift on winds that buffet lime-green aids to navigation that bob in the chilly harbor just off Chandler Hovey Park.

Welcome to Rob Apse's work space: the land of New England lighthouses where he has spent the last five years documenting these iconic cylindrical structures that are sturdy symbols of our colorful seafaring history.

"You could easily knock down a lot of these and put up a big pole and put a light on them," Apse told me the other day, pointing up at Marblehead Light. "But then you'd lose that history. You'd lose that moment.

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"People find hope in these things. It's almost religious. It's a thing that draws people to places like this. In this divisive world, I think one of the cool things about a lighthouse is that it doesn't distinguish between friend and foe. It doesn't matter. It's there to save your life. Or warn you. It's kind of cool."

Yes, cool. And it's a lot of clay for this young filmmaker to mold as he puts the finishing touches on the one-hour documentary film he's making about these solid structures that stand on our coastlines, offering a beaming helping hand amid blizzards and hurricanes, through thick fog and moonless nights.

"In a world that's so chaotic — where everything has turned so divisive — this film was made to give people a small sense of hope and provide some form of a bridge to bring people back together," Apse said. "I don't think it'll heal the world. But I think it's just one of many bridges that needs to be built to connect people back to who we are as humans."

Like the steeples of white churches and the kaleidoscopic foliage of fall, the coastal lighthouse is an emblem of our region, one that Apse is memorializing with a cast of colorful characters — historical

custodians, who know these places and serve both as narrators and a cheering section of Apse's cinematic efforts.

Turns out that lighthouse history is rich. There are lots of salty tales to tell.

The Marblehead lighthouse — automated since 1960 — is not like the ones pictured on coffee mugs and calendars, those tall, white towers topped with black lantern rooms, but nevertheless possesses its own spellbinding history.

"During the Hurricane of 1938, the lighthouse keeper at Marblehead — when the power went out — rigged up his car battery to keep the lighthouse going," said Elinor DeWire, who has authored more than 20 books about lighthouses and is featured in Apse's film, "The Last Lightkeepers."

"That is emblematic of the devotion that lighthouse keepers have. They didn't want their light to go out."

What emerges is a cinematic portrait of stoic and solitary service, of derring-do, and devotion.

"Romance is a good word for it," Jeremy D'Entremont told me. He's an historian and author, a leading lighthouse expert who was the first person Apse spoke to about his film project five years ago.

"There is something about lighthouses that sets them apart from any other structure. Sometimes I think it's easy to overstate the symbolism of lighthouses. But they are symbols of guidance and hope and faith. And in these times, symbols like that are needed very badly. It's almost a primal thing. The appeal of light in the darkness that leads us."

Apse, who was raised in Reading and studied film at Ithaca College in New York, dabbled in comedy filmmaking before he began to concentrate on documentaries.

As he began his lighthouse project, he realized the topic he decided to tackle had a vastness to it that required his return to the drawing board.

So that's what he did. The near-final product features colorful voices and stunning seascapes that form the spine of a breathtakingly beautiful postcard of New England.

"Rob's film is gorgeous and important, in that it gives visual voice to an extremely powerful and essential act of preservation — making sure that lighthouses are still there for future generations to not only see, but also learn about their history," said Eric Jay Dolin, the author of "Brilliant Beacons," a history of the American lighthouse.

As global positioning satellite technology increasingly rendered most traditional lighthouses obsolete, the US government undertook what amounted to a lighthouse fire sale. It began to transfer ownership to new stewards, often nonprofit organizations.

And that leads us to “The Last Lightkeepers.” It’s the title of the film and the people who Apse is focused on. Men and women who, metaphorically, are keeping the light shining brightly.

“It’s the history,” Apse told me. “It’s the stories. There are no real light-keepers, but there are preservationists. There are individuals who are preserving the stories, the structures, and the history.”

Apse, 33, likes to work at sunrise and sunset, when New England colors bloom into a regal, magical brilliance.

That work one morning led him to Thacher Island, off Cape Ann, where two granite towers stand.

Accompanied by the president of the Thacher Island Association, Apse carried his camera into the blossoming colors of a New England dawn.

“And as we were walking over there, he was telling me this story about how, after the Treaty of Versailles, Woodrow Wilson was coming back after his trip. A ship came across Thacher Island in the fog.”

As the story goes, the light-keeper sprang into action, and blew a signal from whistle house, allowing the 28th US president and his party to avoid, at the last moment, collision and calamity.

“So Woodrow Wilson was saved,” Apse told me. “Come to find out that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was also on that boat. He wasn’t the president at the time, but we would have lost two presidents.

“So it was pretty wild that he was saved that night, too. And you can only imagine what life would have been life without FDR. But as he was telling me this story, we were walking and a microburst came across. And, all of a sudden, the sky turned deep purple. It was dark. The wind was blowing. We go into the tower and as we climb to the top of it, the whole island is surrounded in fog and the water is just splashing on the lantern room 125 feet in the air.”

A cinematic moment. Pure serendipity. A bright and salty line tying together the past and present.

And all of it captured in a documentary, now being submitted to film festivals worldwide, about the lighthouses that, against all odds and despite the foulest of weather, remain beacons of hope in all that endless darkness.

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