Cape Neddick Light Station, Maine

By Jeremy D'Entremont

A short distance off the eastern point of Cape Neddick in the town of York, Maine, about two miles north of the entrance to the York River and a mile south of the entrance to the Cape Neddick River, is a high rocky island—about two and a half acres in area—known as the Nubble. It's separated from the area now known as Sohier Park on the mainland by a narrow channel, about 100 feet wide, that's almost dry at low tide. The explorer Bartholomew Gosnold, who met with local Indians there in May 1602, dubbed the island Savage Rock.

One of Gosnold's crew, John Brereton, wrote: "From the said rock came towards us a Biscay shallop with sail and oars, having eight persons in it, whom we supposed at first to be Christians distressed. But approaching us nearer we perceived them to be savages. These coming within call, hailed us, and we answered. . . . They spoke divers Christian words and seemed to understand much more than we, for want of language to comprehend. . . . These much desired our longer stay, but finding ourselves short of our purposed place, we set sail westward, leaving them and their coast."

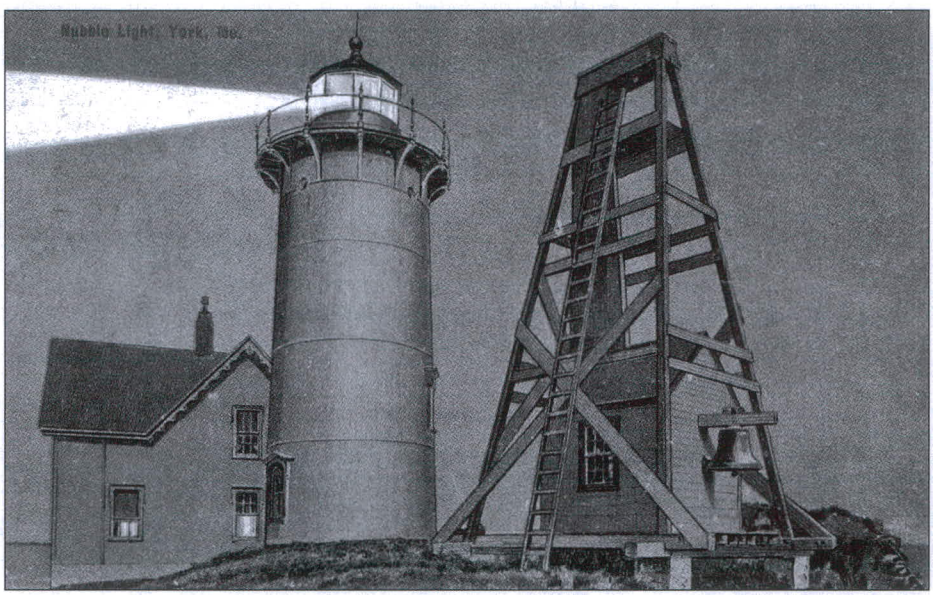
A member of Capt. John Smith's crew, circa 1614, has been given credit for naming the Nubble (often spelled "Knubble" in old records). This is the best known of several New England nubbles. The word nubble is defined as "a small knob or protuberance" by the *Random House Dictionary*; it's an old diminutive of knob or nub.

The geographic boundaries of Cape Neddick are somewhat confusing. Cape Neddick Village and the cape that terminates near the Nubble are separated by the resort area of York Beach, which was developed after the entire area was named Cape Neddick. The peninsula that terminates at the Nubble is also known to locals as "Cape Neck." The area was thriving with shipbuilding, fishing, and lumber exporting in the nineteenth century.



Above – A keeper can be seen ferrying passengers in this early postcard view. From the collection of Jeremy D'Entremont.

Below –Another early postcard view of Cape Neddick Light Station, showing the original skeleton-frame bell tower. From the collection of Jeremy D'Entremont.

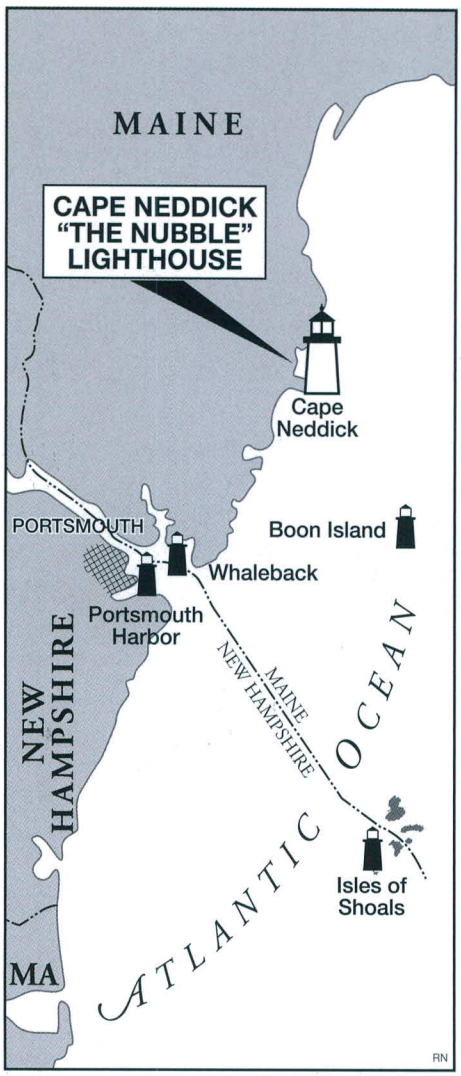


Many local mariners had requested the placement of a lighthouse on the Nubble as early as 1807. Congress appropriated $5,000 for this purpose in 1837, but Capt. Joseph Smith, who had traveled the coast extensively as the captain of a U.S. revenue cutter, recommended against a lighthouse at the Nubble on the grounds that enough lights were already in operation in the vicinity. Instead, he recommended an unlighted beacon at York Ledge,

about two miles offshore from the Nubble, and a lighthouse at Stage Neck, at the entrance to the York River, which would render the river entrance "both easy and safe." An unlighted monument was erected a short time later at York Ledge, designed by the renowned architect Alexander Parris.

Even after the death of several people in the November 1842 wreck of the bark *Isidore*, north of the Nubble near Bald Head Cliff, it still took nearly four more decades before the lighthouse was established. The *Isidore*, according to legend, reappears now and then as a ghost ship with a phantom crew.

New calls for a lighthouse resulted in another congressional appropriation of $5,000 in 1851, but again the project died after some debate. The idea was revived again in 1874, when the Lighthouse Board requested $15,000 for a lighthouse "for the benefit of the coasting trade." The request was repeated in the following year, and Congress made the appropriation in July 1876.



There was a delay in procuring the site, which was the property of multiple owners. Because tourism in the area was on the rise, there were plans for a hotel on or near the island. The bargaining process moved the project back to early 1879, when the island was purchased for $1,500.

The station was constructed under the supervision of Gen. James Chatham Duane, an engineer with the Lighthouse Board. The iron sections were manufactured in Portland and then transported to the island aboard the *U.S.S. Myrtle* in April 1879, and the buildings were completed by June. At first the tower was painted reddish brown; it's been painted white since 1902.

The 41-foot cast-iron tower, lined with brick, was first illuminated on July 1, 1879, with a fixed red light exhibited 88 feet above mean high water from a fourth-order Fresnel lens. A 32-step cast-iron spiral stairway led to the watchroom, and a ladder provided access to the lantern. Miniature lighthouses top the finials on the gallery railing, an architectural detail seen on very few lighthouses.

The keeper's house, painted white, stood about 50 feet north of the tower. The distinctive red oil house was built in 1902, and the walkway connecting the lighthouse to the keeper's house was added in 1911. The great blizzard of February 6–7, 1978, washed out the boathouse, which was replaced by the present structure.

The station originally had a fog bell operated by automatic striking machinery, with a cycle of two blows followed by an interval of 30 seconds, followed by a single blow and another 30-second pause. The bell's characteristic was later changed to a single blow every 30 seconds, and then in 1890 to a single blow every 15 seconds.

A white pyramidal tower replaced the original skeleton-frame bell tower in 1911. For a time, the keepers at Boon Island Light Station could hear the Nubble's 3,000-pound fog bell six miles away. A foghorn replaced the bell, and the bell tower was torn down in 1961.

The present fourth-order Fresnel lens, manufactured in 1891 by F. Barbier in Paris, is not the original one, but was moved from another station in 1928 after the original lens was damaged in an explosion. The original kerosene-fueled incandescent oil vapor lamp remained in use until the light was converted to electricity in 1938.

Leander White of New Castle, New Hampshire, was appointed keeper before the light went into service, but he was then assigned to Whaleback Light Station instead.



A view of the Cape Neddick Light Station circa 1949. Note the now enclosed bell tower and the gingerbread ornamentation on the keeper's dwelling. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.



Undated aerial view showing the 1911 fog bell tower. Note the wartime lookout tower between the light tower and bell tower. Photo Courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard.

Simon Leighton of York subsequently accepted the job, but he had to resign because of illness. Nathaniel H. Otterson of Hookset, New Hampshire, took over as keeper at the end of June 1879 at $500 yearly. Otterson was the cousin of New Hampshire's Governor Natt Head, a fact that apparently had a great deal to do with his appointment.

Soon after the light went into service, the *Portsmouth Chronicle* complained that it was no help to mariners entering York Harbor, although it did benefit vessels traveling along the coast. Coasting vessels had formerly steered for Boon Island Light, but now they could steer directly for the Nubble, meaning a more inside route and shorter voyages.

The lighthouse was a tourist attraction from the time it was built, and the keeper and his family immediately capitalized on the situation. An item in the August 7, 1880, issue of the *Portsmouth (NH) Journal* announced, "Visitors are not allowed to visit the lighthouse at York Nubble between the hours of 6 P.M. and 10 A.M.; but at other times the son of the keeper will row you over and back in his boat for ten cents."

Because so many people were visiting the island in summer, mishaps were not uncommon. In August 1889, it was reported that a Boston man slipped and fell, dislocating his shoulder. The injured man was rowed ashore by the keeper and was then taken to a doctor in Portsmouth. After treatment, he was "considerably shaken up, but merry as ever." In October 1892, a man who visited the Nubble to shoot waterfowl accidentally shot himself in the leg. Again, the keeper rowed him to the mainland for emergency medical help.

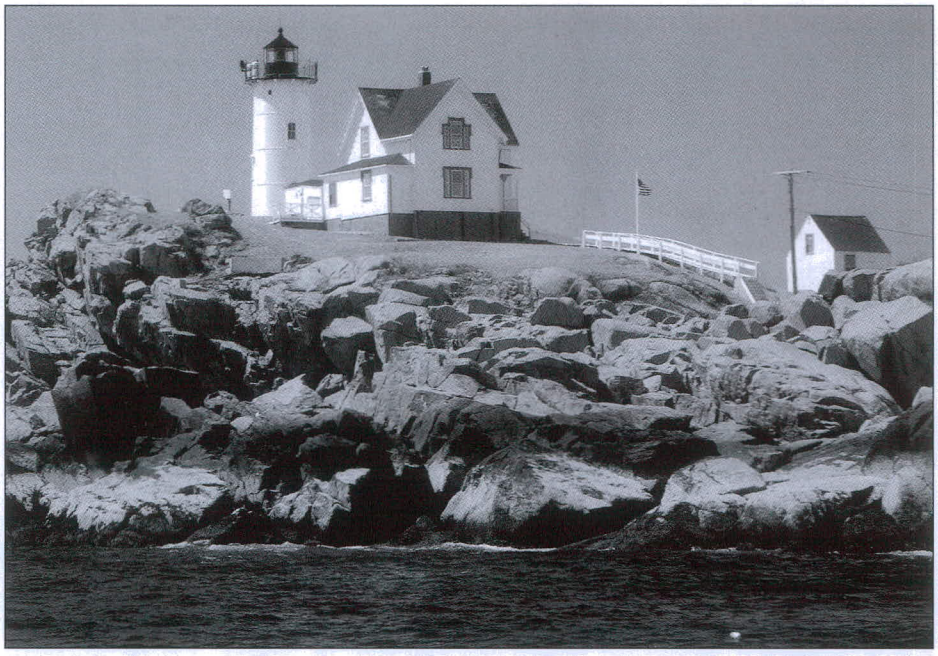
Otterson remained with his wife and son at the Nubble until the end of September 1885. His successor, Brackett Lewis of Kittery, Maine, formerly an assistant keeper at Whaleback Light Station, was in charge from 1885 to 1904, the longest stint of any keeper at the Nubble. While Lewis was keeper, his daughter, Hattie, wedded Charles Billings in the lantern room.

In 1898, a newspaper reported that Lewis had become so accustomed to the fog bell that he no longer heard it, and he often forgot to stop its operation after fog had cleared. In July of that year, it was recorded that the bell had been sounding for at least part of every day but two of the previous thirty.

That same month, Lewis was ordered not to allow visitors on the island on Sundays. He had been charging 10 cents a trip to ferry visitors, and the authorities were apparently worried that the throngs of tourists on Sundays were interfering with his duties. Among the visitors spotted fishing from the island in June 1899 was Senator William E. Mason of Illinois.

The next keeper was William M. Brooks of Kittery, previously at Boon Island and White Island. Brooks and his wife had one son, who lived with an aunt in Portsmouth when school was in session and spent vacations at the light station. Toward the end of the Brooks' tenure, his son died of rheumatic fever at the Nubble at the age of 22.

Like Lewis before him, Brooks picked up extra cash by ferrying sightseers to the island. He also kept a supply of fishing gear and bait available on the island for visiting fishermen. Brooks' superiors noted that his ferry service allowed as many as "200 to 300 people at certain times to roam about the reservation with only the keeper's wife to care for the government property."



Cape Neddick Light Station as seen from the water in August 2007. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.



A common winter scene in Maine with snow covering the ground. Undated photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.

Rose Cushing Labrie, author of *Sentinel of the Sea: Nubble Light*, interviewed Brooks when he was in his 90s. He recalled that 10 cents was charged for round-trip ferry service to the island, and an additional five cents was charged for a tour of the station, led by his wife. The lighthouse authorities finally decided enough was enough, and Brooks "resigned" from lighthouse keeping in October 1912. He later operated the Bay View, a hotel at York Beach. During his retirement years in Kittery, Brooks was known as "Uncle Will" by his many friends.

After more than 25 years at the offshore stations on Boon Island and Burnt Island, Maine, and White Island, New Hampshire, James Burke of Portsmouth became keeper in 1912. One of his sons, Charles, was keeper at Wood Island Light, just up the coast off Biddeford Pool. James Burke had gone to sea at the age of 14 and eventually skippered fishing vessels before turning to lighthouse keeping. Like many lighthouse families, the Burkes kept a cow and chickens on the island. Burke went duck hunting and fishing to supplement his family's food supply. Lobsters, crabs, and mussels were also plentiful near the island.

In a letter to author Clifford Shattuck, James Burke's daughter Lucy Glidden Burke Steffen later recalled other details of life on the Nubble:

"We all had lots of work to do, as everything had to be immaculate throughout the house as well as the lighthouse tower. . . .

"We had lots of company, weather permitting. Many of my schoolmates used to enjoy coming over to the Nubble, some just to spend the day, some to spend the night or possibly to stay for a few days. Sometimes the sea got rough and they had to stay. We had an organ in the living room which I used to play and we all had such good times singing the old songs.

"Our home was a very comfortable six-room house, having a very pleasant living room, a nice size dining room, a large kitchen with pantry, and three bedrooms upstairs. But, of course, no bathroom.

"We had a large parlor stove which seemed to heat most of the house very well. Even though a severe storm might be blowing up outside, we were nice and cozy."

At low tide, it was sometimes possible to walk between the Nubble and the mainland. Lucy recalled being carried piggyback by her father, who would wear hip boots for the occasion. She also recalled the large numbers of birds that would fly into the tower at night; the family sometimes had to rake up hundreds of them that lay dead on the ground in the morning.

James Burke's second wife died during his stay at the Nubble, and the government provided a lighthouse tender to transport the family to Boothbay Harbor for the funeral.

During World War I, the Burkes were joined on the Nubble by military personnel

who kept watch for enemy submarines. The light was dimmed on some nights and extinguished on others, the intention being to confuse "possible submersibles."

Fairfield Moore, previously at Rockland Breakwater Light Station, was keeper from 1921 to 1928. The first birth of a child at the Nubble occurred on August 23, 1923, when Moore's daughter Phyllis Moore Searles delivered a baby girl.

In July 1926, it was reported that the fog bell tower was moved about four feet from its foundation by a powerful storm, leaving it on the brink of a precipice. Moore didn't dare sound the bell because he feared that the vibration could plunge the bell and tower into the sea. Repairs were soon completed.

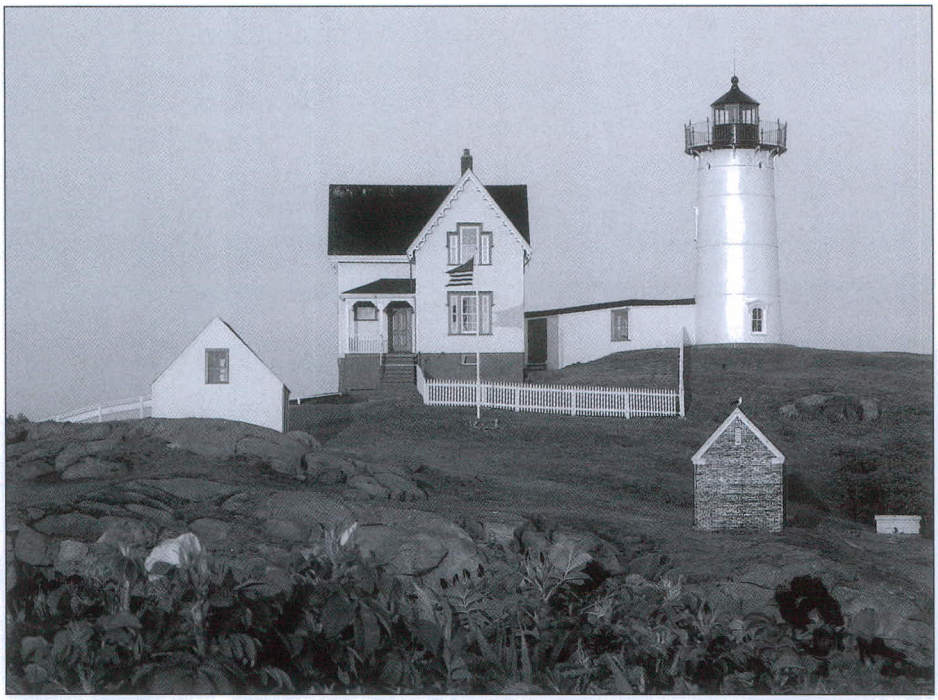
On March 20, 1927, the keeper's daughter Eva Moore Kimball went into labor during a severe snowstorm. Keeper Moore rowed across the channel and picked up a local doctor. The two men returned to the Nubble just in time for the last seconds of the birth of Eva's daughter, Barbara.

Fairfield Moore returned to Rockland Breakwater Light Station in 1928 and was succeeded at the Nubble by Edmund Howe, who had previously been at Great Duck Island Light Station. During his tenure, Howe married his housekeeper, Emily Williams, in the living room of the keeper's house.

Unlike some of his predecessors, Howe wasn't eager to ferry would-be sightseers to the island. "Am I supposed to go ashore after everyone that comes down the bank and calls to me?" he wrote. "If I do I shan't get much chance to do anything else." The district superintendent responded by reassuring Howe that keepers had been "discharged from your station for transporting passengers to and from the station for hire."

Howe left in 1930 owing to ill health. After a very brief stint by Truman J. Lathrop, Eugene Coleman of Georgetown, Maine, became keeper following some time as first assistant at Boon Island. The keeper-powered ferry service was a thing of the past, but Coleman and his wife, Amanda, had plenty of visitors. The guest register showed totals of from 722 to 1092 visitors yearly between 1930 and 1934.

The Burkes had left their family cat behind because he had come so attached to the Nubble, and the big tabby weighed 19 pounds by the time the Colemans arrived. Sambo Tonkus, also known as Mr. T, became well known to locals and tourists alike for his mousing and swimming prowess. Three or four times a day, he would swim to the mainland to hunt rodents hiding among the rocks.



Cape Neddick Light Station in June 2007. This is the view most people see from Sohier Park across the gap that forms the Nubble. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.



A recent aerial view of the Nubble in September 2007 taken from the water side. Note the high bluff on this side. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.

During the Colemans' stay, the first indoor toilet was installed, and electricity came to the Nubble in 1938. During World War II, the light was extinguished and a lookout tower was built on the island. A contingent of Coast Guardsmen kept a 24-hour eye out for German U-boats. A U-boat sighted in 1943 just to the east of the Nubble was subsequently sunk by a depth charge southwest of Boon Island.

The historian Edward Rowe Snow, in his book *Famous New England Lighthouses* wrote that on one occasion, Eugene Coleman was

rowing across the channel near the Nubble with his wife, a friend, and a load of groceries, when the boat capsized. "The dory went over and the keeper had a busy five minutes, trying to rescue his wife, his friend, and the groceries," wrote Snow, "but all ended happily except for minor injuries to the groceries."

The Colemans moved on to Nauset Light on Cape Cod in 1943, and thereafter Coast Guard keepers staffed the Nubble. It remained a family station.

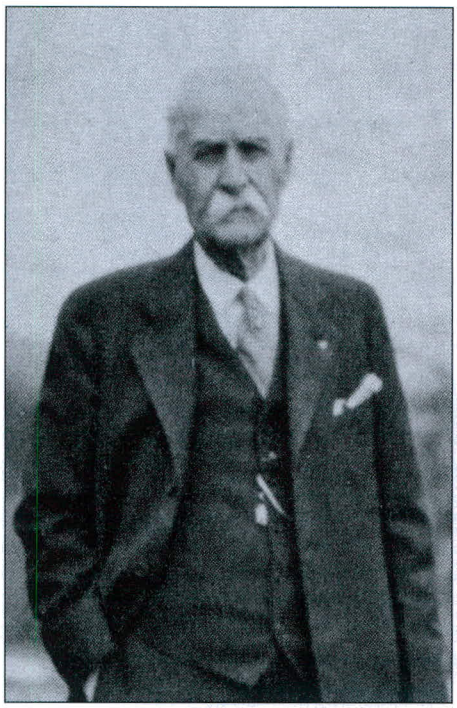
Elson Small was the keeper down the coast at Portsmouth Harbor Light, New Hampshire, from 1946 to 1948. On several occasions, he was called to substitute for the officer in charge at the Nubble. His wife, Connie, later recalled in her book, *The Lighthouse Keeper's Wife*, that she loved to have lunch on the porch at the Nubble, but she "felt like a goldfish in a bowl" as tourists watched her from across the channel.

The Coast Guard keeper from 1948 to 1951, Wilbur Brewster, had a parrot whose home was a cage in the living room. According to the lighthouse historian William O. Thomson, the parrot enjoyed carrying on conversations with visitors. Its favorite phrase was "I'll have a cup of coffee." Connie Small wrote that the bird loved to chatter along with her husband's banjo playing.

The usual way of getting to and from the Nubble was by boat. Coast Guard correspondence from the early 1950s shows that some consideration was given to the idea of a two-person aerial cable tramway between the mainland and the island, and a footbridge was also considered. Because of high costs and potential dangers, neither idea was pursued.

For a time, the keepers used a basket suspended on a line across the channel to transport supplies. Around 1967, one of the Coast Guard keepers, David Winchester, decided to save time and trouble by putting his two children in the basket each morning to send them on their way to school. A *Boston Globe* photographer snapped a picture of seven-year-old Ricky Winchester in the basket, and the photo appeared in newspapers across the country. After the district commander saw the photo in a Boston paper, an arrangement was made for the children to board on the mainland during the week. Soon after that, it became policy that families with school-age children were not sent to the Nubble.

Michael Hackett became the Coast Guard keeper in 1973. His wife, Sue, once called for someone to come and fix her Singer sewing machine. The repairman was to have been picked up in a boat by Michael, but he misunderstood the directions. A day late, the repairman showed up at the door—he had waited for low tide and walked across the channel.



Above –James Burke was keeper 1912-19.



Above right – Fairfield Moore was keeper 1921-28.



Eugene Coleman, keeper 1930-43, is seen here with the light station's resident cat, Sambo Tonkus. All three photos courtesy of William O. Thompson.

The Hacketts also later recalled a man who phoned them at 2:00 a.m. to ask how the surfing conditions were near the lighthouse.

Russell Ahlgren, the last Coast Guard keeper, lived on the island with his wife, Brenda, and young son, Christopher, for 18 months before the 1987 automation of the station. The automation and destaffing were not well received by the people of York. William O. Thomson commented to the *Wall Street Journal*, "It's the biggest issue in our little town. I can't remember people getting so upset about anything since World War II broke out." The man installing the automation equipment, when asked what he was doing, avoided trouble by telling people onshore he was going out to fix the Ahlgrens' bathroom.

A crowd of more than 300 spectators witnessed the automation ceremonies on July 13, 1987, in a dense fog. Brenda Ahlgren wrote down her thoughts about leaving the island:

"On our last night on the island we went for one last walk. We sat back on the rocks with Christopher between us and just watched the glow from that beautiful tall white tower and listened to the familiar drone of the horn we had come to enjoy. We felt that in its own special way the light was saying goodbye to family life on the island. As we sat there thinking back over our special adventure there was no way to hold back the tears."

The Town of York was granted a 30-year lease to care for the station in 1989. In the same year, the town received a grant from the Maine Historic Preservation Committee for restoration work on the keeper's house. Two second-story windows were removed and replaced by a larger window that resembles the one originally installed. When the town

took over, more than 300 unsolicited applications were received from people wanting to be live-in caretakers. The keeper's house remains unoccupied because of water and sewer issues.

In November 1997, the people of York voted overwhelmingly to allow the town's selectmen to "adopt" the lighthouse. Under the Maine Lights Program, coordinated by the Island Institute, the station officially became the property of the town in 1998. York's Parks and Recreation department manages the site.

In 2001, the Town installed a new 120-foot ramp and dock on the Nubble. The foundation of the lighthouse was painted and regrouted, and the walkway to the lighthouse was replaced. More restoration of the buildings is needed. An April 2007 nor'easter damaged the keeper's house roof; both the island and Sohier Park sustained additional damage.

Sohier Park, incidentally, is named for William Davis Sohier, a lawyer from Boston who gave the land to the town in 1929. His father had bought the land for the fine duck hunting.

It's been estimated that 500,000 people visit Sohier Park annually to view the lighthouse. Director Mike Sullivan of York Parks and Recreation once said, "Part of the allure of Nubble Light is its mystical nature. You can't quite get there. You can almost reach it but you can't get there."

One of the most popular events of the year on the southern Maine coast is the annual Lighting of the Nubble, when the lighthouse and other buildings are illuminated with Christmas lights. The late November event is accompanied by holiday music and never fails to draw a large crowd. The lighting has its roots in the early 1980s, when a volunteer, Margaret Cummings, donated some holiday lights in memory of her sister.

One of the Nubble's tireless volunteers, Verna Rundlett, later originated a Christmas in July event, which gives summer visitors a chance to view the station decorated just as it is at Christmastime. She also supervised the building of a welcome center at Sohier Park. The building, open seasonally, houses a gift shop and public restrooms.

The Nubble Light has probably appeared on more postcards, calendars, and other souvenirs than any other New England lighthouse, with the possible exception of Portland Head Light. In 1977, when NASA sent Voyager II into space to photograph the outer solar system, it was also loaded with artifacts designed to teach possible extraterrestrial civilizations about our planet. One of the images it carried was a picture of the Nubble Lighthouse.



Interior view of Cape Neddick Lighthouse.The cast iron exterior is lined with brick and has a cast iron stairway. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.



Cape Neddick Light Station with its annual display of Christmas lights. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.

For more information, or to help with the preservation of the Cape Neddick "Nubble" Light Station, contact the Friends of Nubble Light, 186 York Street, York, ME 03909. Phone: (207) 363-3078. In addition to the view from Sohier Park, the lighthouse can be seen from a seasonal excursion boat (the *Finestkind*) leaving Perkins Cove in Ogunquit, and from occasional lighthouse cruises leaving Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

This article is excerpted from Jeremy D'Entremont's new book, *The Lighthouses of Maine*, published by Commonwealth Editions, to be available in early summer 2009.