Nantucket Features

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Errata

Try as we might to get things right, we're the first to admit that occasionally we get it wrong. Last week, we got it wrong twice in one sentence.

A regular column in Yesterday's Island's May 29 edition contained the comment: "She was a duck-out-of-water oddity coming in a close second behind the Gilbraith family's (of Cheaper by the Dozen fame) cozy 1930's faux-lighthouse nestled just in from the Jetties Beach." For this, we owe an apology to the Gilbreth family, whose name we misspelled and whose home we inadvertently insulted.

In an effort to set the record straight, here are some details about these historic buildings, graciously supplied by two members of the still-numerous Gilbreth clan: Margaret Nipper, who first called our attention to the errors, and her cousin, who had an article about the structures printed in a 1991 edition of Historic Nantucket, a magazine published by the Nantucket Historical Association that is a wealth of information about our island's past.

The structures referred to a "faux lighthouse" are actually two "range lights," built in 1838 near Brant Point and nicknamed the Cliffside "Bug Lights." The small white towers were located about 300-feet apart. The Rear Range Beacon exhibited a fixed red light and the Front Range Beacon exhibited a fixed white light. Peleg Easton was appointed the first Lightkeeper of the Range Lights.

In 1908, two new Nantucket Harbor Range Lights were erected after the East Jetty and West Jetty were built to stabilize the safe shipping channel into Nantucket Harbor. This Front Range Light exhibits a quick-flashing white light 35-feet above sea level and the Rear Range Light exhibits a fixed white light 51-feet above sea level.

Because the Nantucket Cliffs Range Lights were no longer required, the deactivated beacons were sold as surplus to Frank and Lillian Gilbreth in 1921. The Gilbreth's used them as extra bedrooms for their large family.

According to author Frank B. Gilbreth, Jr. in his Historic Nantucket article, "…when my father bought our small lot, the larger of the bug-lights was almost due south of the smaller. Their purpose, of course, was directional. When a navigator saw one light above the other, he had a reliable guide in entering the Nantucket channel.…at the time we moved into the enlarged tool house, our dad also acquired the

taller tower.…an unforgettable sight for your chronicler, then a deliriously excited freckle-faced tyke of ten, was that of a group of Nantucket men with a horse and a ship's capstan, moving the larger lighthouse to its current location, close aboard and just abaft our present cottage…The tower, jacked up and placed on rounded logs, was pulled at the rate of about thirty feet an hour. This was a ticklish job, fraught with considerable danger to all hands and the horse, and was performed bravely and successfully."

When she reported our errors, Margaret Nipper conveyed to me just how much these structures have meant to the Gilbreth family over the decades, a sentiment Frank Gilbreth captures well in his article when he explains: "What a thrill it was to have one's own lighthouse!—although the winds sometimes howled frighteningly at night as they swirled around the rounded structure. And one summer a red-winged blackbird started singing every dawn from a vent at the top…and the acoustics, in the hollow cone, sounded like a pip-organ in full spate."

Mea culpa. And a thank you to the Gilbreth family for helping us to correct the errors.

—Suzanne Daub, editor

