The Lighthouses of Edgartown



By George Worthylake

The original Edgartown Lighthouse looking north from the harbor. The small structure at right contained the automatic fog bell striking machinery. Note the bell weight tower behind the bell house. The small room, middle of the first floor, projecting out over the water may have been the privy. Date unknown. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Records indicate that the people of Martha's Vineyard Island in Massachusetts were engaged in whaling as early as 1653, cutting up "drift whales."

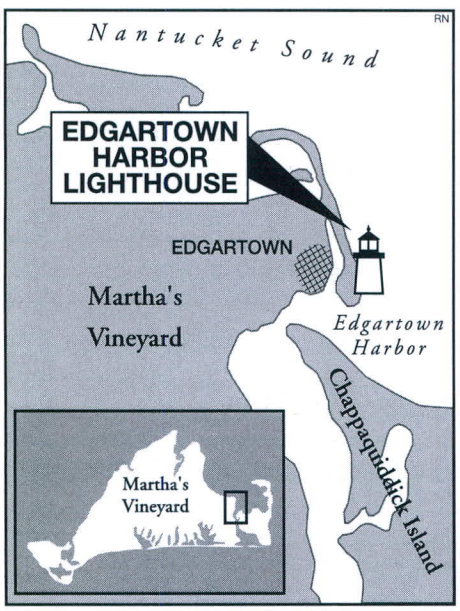
In the 19th century the Massachusetts towns of New Bedford, Nantucket and Edgartown were three of the busiest whaling ports in the state, if not the country. By 1775 the whaling vessels of Edgartown were realizing $150,000 a year from the industry. It was a dangerous industry. In one 60-year period, two local clergymen recorded the deaths of 72 men in the whaling industry from their congregations alone; inscribing in their journals phrases like, "lost at sea," and "killed by a whale." A gravestone in an island cemetery states, "John and Lydia, That lovely pair, A whale killed him, Her body lies here."

Early in the 19th century, a government official described the Edgartown Harbor as, "...for excellence, the safest, most commodious, and easiest of access, among all others in Vineyard Sound."

In 1812 funds were appropriated to establish buoys "as necessary" to mark the harbor entrance. However, a lighthouse wasn't constructed at the harbor until 1828, when $5,500 was appropriated "...for building a pier and light-house on the Point of Flats, at the entrance to Edgartown Harbor." The resultant structure was an ungainly two-story wooden house with a lantern on the roof. It was constructed on wooden piles (later converted to stone). The keeper had to row to shore for supplies until Congress authorized $2,500 in 1830 to connect the lighthouse to shore with a wooden causeway 1,800 feet long. The causeway proved to be a continuous maintenance headache for the Lighthouse Service for years. The very first winter 40 feet of the causeway was carried away by ice. In 1836 it was damaged by a storm.

The first keeper was Jeremiah Pease, who among other things was a dedicated diarist. Over the years Pease recorded much about life in and around Edgartown. The Pease family name, along with family names like Mayhew and Coffin, was common on Martha's Vineyard. Pease was certainly a jack of all trades. His diary tells of him setting the broken arm bone of William Holley, surveying land at Cape Pogue for the Lighthouse Service, drawing up deeds and contracts and even doing accounting work.

In 1838, due to numerous complaints from mariners about our national aids to navigation system, Navy Lt. E.W. Carpenter was dispatched by the Secretary of the Treasury to investigate the condition of lighthouses and other aids between Boston, MA and Newport, RI. After viewing the Edgartown Lighthouse he reported, "This light is on the keeper's dwelling, at the end of a short wooden breakwater in the harbor of Edgartown. Cape Pogue light, 4 miles outside is the guide to the harbor, so that the light on the breakwater requires to be of very little magnitude; yet I found the same number of lamps burning here as in the most exposed situations in the district. It is true only seven of the ten were fronting the sea, the other three being so placed as to reflect their light, to no useful purpose toward the shore. I recommend the suppression of six of these lamps, and the compact arrangement of the remaining four to suit the approach to the breakwater. In case it should be objected that this light, not being large and striking, might be sufficiently contrasted with the lights on board the shipping and on shore, red chimneys or tube-glasses might be used...It cannot be long before Government will have to reconstruct this breakwater and light-house, as the worms have made great havoc of them, and the sea threatens them, particularly the latter, with total destruction. When that time shall arrive, I recommend the permanent conversion of this light to a red one, consisting of the present proposed number of lamps..."



Mariners continued to criticize our aids to navigation. Another investigation was launched in 1842, when then Secretary of the Treasury, Walter Forward, dispatched I.W.P. Lewis to make a comprehensive survey of the aids to navigation on a portion of the New England coastline with a view of not only recommending improvements to the existing aids, but also effecting improvements in the overall system of the management of the entire Lighthouse Service. Lewis's report contained the following regarding the Edgartown Lighthouse, "A wooden frame dwelling-house, with lantern erected on the ridge. This house stands at the extremity of a trestle bridge, fifteen hundred feet long, which has been magnified into a breakwater. The house was erected on piles, but these giving way and letting the chimneys overboard, it became necessary to construct a stone pier for its support. This pier was built three years since, it is a square block of rough split stone, filled in with ballast, has settled thirteen inches out of level on the east side,...but answers a better purpose than the original plan of piling. The house is two stories high, three rooms on the first floor and two chambers above, boarded and shingled on the outside and plastered within, except one room on the first floor, the chamber entry. The frame of the house is decayed in several places, plastering cracked and fallen off in large patches, roof and sides of house leaky, and lantern rickety..."

Lewis's report included a statement from the keeper at the time:

"I was appointed keeper of this light in March, 1841, upon a salary of $350 per annum. The light-house is a frame building, standing upon a pier about 1,800 feet from the shore and connected therewith by a causeway made of piles, etc. The light-house and causeway were built in 1828 by Mr. Bowker, as agent for Winslow Lewis, the contractor for the work. I was employed upon the work as a carpenter. The whole structure was badly done. The light-house originally stood upon a wooden pier; three years ago it was necessary to replace this with one of stone, the old pier being entirely decayed and rotten. The frame of the house was light and weak, and the building always leaky. The lantern stands upon the roof of the house, and is shaken by the force of storms, causing other leaks in the roof. The plastering is off the walls in several places, and one room, together with the upper entry, never was plastered at all by the builder. There are ten lamps in the lantern, one of which has always faced the door, so as to have been entirely useless for fourteen years. The lantern leaks all about the door and the angles of it. During the gale of October last, it shook so that I had great difficulty in keeping my light burning. There is no rain water cistern connected with the establishment, all they used for cleaning, &, being brought from shore. The causeway has been knocked to pieces five or six times, and has been an expensive concern to keep in sufficient order to cross it with safety. It is my opinion, the whole establishment was very badly built in the first place."

Sylvanus Crocker, Keeper

In 1847, $5,000 was allocated to replace the causeway with a stone break-water topped by a walkway. An additional $4,000 was authorized in 1850 to complete the project. Eventually, the breakwater caused sand to accrete and created a beach between the lighthouse and shore.

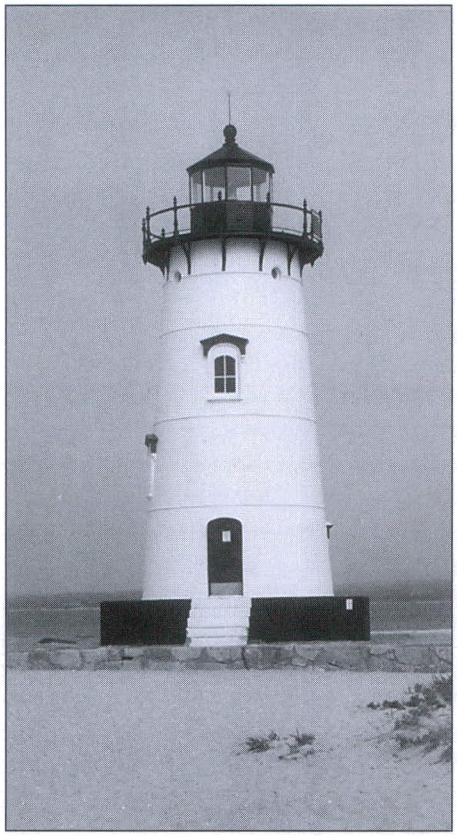
The Vineyard Gazette reported in April, 1856, of a fire in the keeper's dwelling, "It was caused by the boiling over of a kettle of varnish which was placed on the stove. The damage was very trifling."

During the 1860's extensive repairs and renovations occurred, including repairs to the walkway. Two iron smokestacks were installed.

In 1939, after 111 years of service, and surviving the 1938 hurricane, the Edgartown Lighthouse was in very poor condition and certainly a non-standard type of structure. The Lighthouse Service announced the lighthouse would be demolished. This news brought a considerable amount of controversy. Ralph Tinkham, Chief of Engineering at headquarters, wrote about the controversy in his memoirs. Tinkham served for many years in the Bureau of Lighthouses as Superintendent of several districts, before being appointed as Chief of Engineering for that service. When the Coast Guard assumed control he retained his position and was made a Captain. In his memoirs he wrote,

"An episode of the period of my service as Chief Engineer of the Lighthouse Service is recalled with satisfaction and some amusement in retrospect. At the entrance of the harbor of Edgartown...stood a structure of no architectural merit, in fact it bordered on the hideous in perspective, built entirely of wood, with an iron lantern for the navigation light perched on the roof. This non-descript structure was over 100 years old, in constant need of repair at a high upkeep, providing quarters for one keeper and his wife. It had been decided to eliminate the excessive cost of maintenance and materially reduce the cost of operation of this station by tearing down the old structure, and erecting in its place a...steel skeleton tower surmounted by a modern light unit automatically controlled...As soon as these plans became known in the community there was an immediate uprising of protest. Edgartown was the principal city of Martha's Vineyard, and the seat of its local government by a board of selectmen. It accommodated an extensive artists' colony, and in it was published a weekly newspaper, *The Vineyard Gazette*, of superior merit, its editor an aggressive and accomplished individual. The entire community was up in arms, aided and abetted by the newspaper, its pages every week devoting columns to long editorials of fiery eloquence. Some of the community deplored the loss of [the] employment [of] the old keeper of long and faithful service. The artists' colony vociferously objected to tearing down this historical structure so picturesque in its hoary mantle of a hundred years. They and many others abhorred the idea of a "windmill tower" at the entrance to their harbor. The editor and other influential citizens of Edgartown solicited the support of their two senators and of their representative in Congress. Both the Commissioner of Lighthouses and the Secretary of Commerce were bombarded with letters of protest, seemingly from every inhabitant of Martha's Vineyard, as well as from the Massachusetts Senators and the Congressman from that district...and every week came a marked copy of *The Vineyard Gazette*. The campaign of protest became a crusade.

"Of the advantages of the proposed project I was thoroughly convinced, and after consultation with the Commissioner... [all] concurred in the change not only as an economy, but as a distinct improvement. The Secretary of Commerce, although impressed with these arguments, was under considerable political pressure, and wanted an end to the clamor...it was definitely decided that the project was to be carried out and I was delegated to proceed to Edgartown, meet the selectmen, and explain to them the reasons for the decision.



Present cast-iron Edgartown tower in 1996. Photo by Ainsley Dixon.

"I was joined by Superintendent Eaton of the Second District...at the Town Hall at the appointed time, we were met by the head selectman and escorted into the assembly room. There we were introduced to the other selectmen...and to the editor of *The Vineyard Gazette*, who by now was the recognized leader of the protest parade. There were a considerable number of townspeople assembled, their attentive attitude indicated that they were willing to hear what the Department representative had to say, but were equally determined to have their own way. For, instead of a private or closed conference as we had expected, a formal session of the selectmen was called to order, and I was invited to address a regular Town Meeting. It was immediately apparent to me that this called for all the diplomacy and finesse of which I was capable; these people could not be dictated to, they must be convinced.

"Speaking quietly, in a matter of fact manner, I reviewed the factors considered to meet the need for replacing the old worn out structure with a more efficient aid to vessels approaching the harbor, emphasizing arrangements made for continuing the employment of the old keeper, concluding by quoting the Assistant Secretary's instruction to inform them that the decision to make the change was final. While speaking I could sense the earnest and respectful attention being given me by all present, without any interruption. [It was my] impression with the chairman and the editor, by their questions, that my name might have invited the courteous reception by these tradition minded New Englanders, for the name Tinkham was a very old one in Massachusetts...When I took my seat, the chairman recognized in succession three citizens from the audience. First was the editor, who stated that an important objection was the type of tower to be erected. Another represented the views of the artists' colony, regretting the removal of a cherished landmark. The third, a public minded citizen who took a practical view, recognizing the good sense of the arguments I had presented, then offered a suggestion that proved to be a solution generally acceptable. He agreed with the editor in opposing what had become known as the 'windmill tower,' and advanced the opinion that if the government would erect a structure that really looked like a traditional lighthouse, something similar, he remarked, to that at West Chop (a lighthouse on the extreme north point of [the island])...he thought the compromise would be acceptable to the community. I then took the floor again and gave assurance that the change thus suggested would be worked out. Turning to Superintendent Eaton at my side, I asked if he saw any objection to dismantling a tower I knew to be standing at an isolated point [The Ipswich Rear Range Light tower] on the northern coast of Massachusetts...As the tower referred to was built of flanged cast-iron plates bolted together into a graceful conical structure surmounted by the traditional glass and iron lantern, dismantling, transporting, and re-erecting its component parts presented no difficult problem.

"Superintendent Eaton was agreeable and offered to make the substitution upon receipt of official instructions.

"This agreement was applauded by most of those present, and the selectmen adopted a resolution approving the compromise...Later, the chairman confided to me that he and a majority of selectmen had recognized from the beginning that the change would be an actual improvement, but that community sentiment for an old time landmark had gained such momentum that their hands had been tied until this meeting... To the editor, who reluctantly acquiesced to the decision, I promised to send a drawing that would assist in visualizing the appearance of the new lighthouse in its harbor setting.

"On my return to Washington...an architect on my staff, who was considerable of an artist, prepared a colored rendering of the proposed new lighthouse in perspective, on its pier at the harbor entrance, with the picturesque island background. This was sent to the Edgartown editor who displayed it in a store window in town, and reproduced it in *The Vineyard Gazette* with an accompanying editorial complimentary to the Government's considerate attitude. The District Superintendent proceeded at once to carry out the approved plan, and the new lighthouse became an ornament to the locality."

The project was completed in 1939, shortly after the Coast Guard absorbed the Lighthouse Service.

As Engineer Tinkham remarked, the Edgartown Lighthouse became an "ornament to the locality." The "new" tower was automated as soon as it was erected and a Lamp Lighter was employed to periodically service it. Today its image adorns all manner of souvenirs of the Vineyard. Although the Coast Guard still maintains the optic in the lantern room, the maintenance of the tower is attended to by the Vineyard Historical Society. They also have a license to maintain The Gay Head, Cape Pogue and East Chop Towers on the island.

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