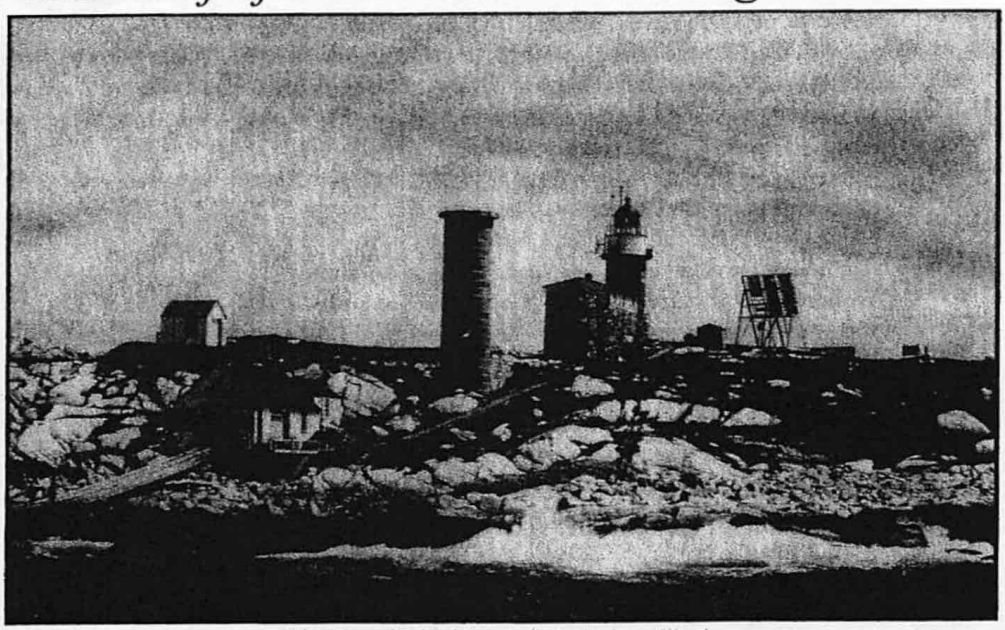
Keeper of the Flame

A slice of life at Matinicus Rock Lighthouse



Matinicus Light, Maine photo by Ken Black.

Story courtesy of the Granite State News

By Natalie Peterson

Lighthouses have fascinated mankind for centuries, and stories of great heroism, sea battles and incredible storms have become part of our literature and history. More importantly, the lights and the keepers who manned them contributed in no small way to the growth of our young nation and the safety of our coastal waters.

Today, however, the keepers are gone, replaced by solar-powered beacons, often placed on structures resembling short radio towers. Many of the old lighthouse towers are fighting for existence.

It is a way of life that has disappeared into history.

Fortunately, many of the lights are being leased or sold by the Coast Guard to non-profit groups interested in preserving the lighthouses. But one fact remains - there are no more "manned" lighthouses on our East Coast except for Boston Harbor Light (1716), our nation's first lighthouse and now a National Historic Landmark.

What was it like to serve on a rocky island, 24 miles at sea, at one of the most historic and dangerous lighthouses on our East Coast? Only a keeper would know.

Meet David Brackett of Sandwich, NH currently Lt. David Brackett of the Wolfeboro, NH Fire and Rescue Department, formerly Coast Guardsman David Brackett, head keeper at Matinicus Rock Lighthouse off Rockland, Maine, and, for a while, a relief keeper at Cape Neddick Light (better known as "The Nubble") at York, Maine.

Brackett comes from a sea-faring background. He grew up on the water and always loved boats. His two brothers joined the Merchant Marine, but Brackett joined the U.S. Coast Guard right after graduation from the University of New Hampshire. He served 8 years on active duty and 13 years as a reservist. "I enjoyed it - no doubt about it," he says.

Brackett served on a 133-foot buoy tender out of Boston, taking care of navigational aids in the harbors and rivers from Cape Cod to Rockland, Maine. "It was nice duty, and we had a very specific job," he says. That job included checking the chains and anchors of buoys, supplying fuel and water to lighthouses on or near shore, and carrying replacement battery packs and bulbs for lighted markers.

Ships, tide, currents and the depth of the waters made this dangerous duty, especially the Piscataqua River in the Kittery-Portsmouth area, one of the most dangerous service areas. Brackett's tender went up-river as far as the Dover area, where smaller boats took over.

Later, Brackett commanded a 180-foot Coast Guard vessel serving further out in open ocean. Both assignments involved dangers, "but it was just part of the job," he says.

After putting in time as a relief keeper at Nubble Light, Brackett was in line for a keeper's assignment. He had hoped to be assigned to a "family station," one where he could be joined by his wife, but he was appointed head keeper at Matinicus rock, a "stag station," once considered to be too dangerous and difficult for a family. It had been that way for many years and with good reason.

Matinicus Rock guards the entrance to Penobscot Bay, 24 miles off the coast of Rockland. The historic lighthouse sits on 33-acres of barren rock and is considered to be one of the most dangerous locations along the entire Atlantic coast. It is the most fog-shrouded light in Maine.

The usual tour of duty at the lighthouse was 12 months, but Brackett spent 14 months there, while his wife lived in "nearby" Camden. "It was an interesting 14 months," he says.

True to the tradition of lighthouse keepers, maintaining a light and the station with its grounds took priority. "I was the officer in charge. The three other people assigned with me were all good people. Our station was immaculate. We used bowling alley wax on the hardwood floors and never wore our shoes inside," says Brackett with great pride.

Generally, two men stood watch for 24 hours, making rounds to check the light, the radio beacon (a directional signal for mariners) and reporting weather readings every three hours. In the daytime, it was necessary to cover the Fresnel lens to protect the bulbs from the sun. "We did a lot of polishing and washed the windows every day," he says.

The summer months were busy ones. In the time Brackett was at Matinicus, he and his men rebuilt the tram (used to bring supplies and boat up the rocky cliff) and the helicopter landing pad. They cleaned and painted the bricks inside, repaired the stone masonry, and did other general maintenance.

Coast Guardsman David Brackett at the time he served at Matinicus Rock Light. Photo courtesy of David Brackett.



Brackett also worked with the Audubon Society, the current owners of the island, banding petrels, a seabird. Since the birds fly only at night, he checked the "fishiest" holes first, reaching into nests at night, searching for newborn chicks, fed a diet of regurgitated fish by their caring parents. This experience was "really enjoyable," says Brackett. "It made me join the Audubon Society."

For one month each year, approximately 2,000 terns took over the island to nest. "That was a pleasure, even though we were very limited as to where we could go. The terns were very protective of their nests, so we wore hard hats and carried a broom whenever we went outside. The birds would peck at the broom. They always go to the highest point," Brackett explains.

But life on Matinicus took on a different life in the winter months, especially when fierce storms struck. Brackett recalls at least two hurricanes. The Coast Guardsmen set up storm lines to the generator house, lines they could hold onto should the generator require attention. The light ran on the electricity from the generator, so its functioning was critical.

Boards, held in place by old nails, blew out, so Brackett and his men had to brave the elements to strap the building with new boards and nails to save the walls. "We weren't heroes, but there were times...," he says modestly.

Just before his daughter Heather was born, 84-m.p.h. winds forced solid sheets of green water over the 50- foot tower, 100-feet above sea level.

That the current tower and buildings have survived more than 100 years of the ravages of Mother Nature is a tribute to the architect and the builders. There are no corners on the living quarters, the roof or the tower, and there are no windows on the storm-side of the building.

Smokey pauses for a snapshot before chasing down more entertainment at the lighthouse. Photo courtesy of David Brackett.



"It's like a ship going into the sea all the time, but at least this one didn't rock, roll and pitch," Brackett says.

"The isolation didn't bother us most days. A sailor's life is like self-improvement," he says, referring to author Joseph Conrad, famous for his sea-related novels. Brackett spent his free time doing a lot of reading and drawing buildings and landscapes (not the lighthouse). Eventually, he attended art school, graduating from the Boston Museum's School of Fine Arts, where he trained as a gold and silversmith, minoring in graphics.

Today he has his own pewter company, Kingswood Pewter, although he has little time to do all he'd like to do.

But he recalls times of boredom when he carefully read everything he could find, "including the page numbers." His engineer took a different track. He wasn't inclined to books and art, preferring a more hands-on activity. "He polished every copper pipe in the house, including the water pipes in the basement, until they glistened," Brackett recalls. "You can only do so much maintenance."

A dog by the name of "Smokey" provided companionship and entertainment. Exiled to the island because of his exuberance and a fondness for chasing cats, Smokey found the island and his new owners much to his liking. "He would come when he was called, and he was pretty well-behaved most of the time," Brackett recalls. He had to be kept tied inside when the terns returned, however.

Noise was a part of life on the island - birds, waves, wind, the fog signal - there was always noise. Brackett claimed that, after a while, he didn't hear it. But once, after logging 400 consecutive hours of fog (and its accompanying fog signal), he went ashore. After a few minutes of conversation with his wife, she asked if he was all right. He had been speaking in 20 second timeframes, pausing and repeating the pattern, unconsciously expecting three incredible blasts of the fog signal every 20 seconds.

Near the end of his tour of duty, Brackett and his men were ordered to rebuild the helicopter pad. Everything was in place. Only the frame had to be nailed down before he and his men could go ashore on leave for Christmas, a shift change.

Three days before Christmas, the wind chill factor was minus 20 degrees. Ice filled the holes they drilled for the six-inch spikes. They could drive only one or two spikes at a time before having to seek shelter and warmth. Brackett and his men worked all day long to complete their task.

The next day dawned clear and calm. "It was a beautiful day. The inspection went very well, and I got out on Dec. 24," Brackett says.

Like many of his predecessors, for Brackett, the magic of Matinicus Rock Light Station far outweighed the boredom and the hardships of the island. He still remembers the beauty and the awesome power of nature that surrounded him there. He fondly remembers Albert Bunker, boat pilot and fisherman, a resident of nearby Matinicus Island. "He took care of us," Brackett says.

He remembers cooking a seagrass, dubbed "goose tongue." Cooked with a little bacon, "It tasted like green beans" he says.

Then there was a stray Snowy Owl that returned each November and basically sat in the same spot for a full month.

And, of course, Brackett remembers the storms and having to take shelter in the basement (above ground) or the tower, as waves swept across the island and sometimes, even the tower. "It was spectacular at times," he says.

So strong is the magic of Matinicus Rock Light that Brackett says, "If they made it a family light, I'd probably be out there today."

But times have changed. Matinicus Rock Light still stands, but the light itself is now a solar-powered beacon. It was automated in December 1984, one of the first lights to be automated because of the harsh environment. The Fresnel lens has been donated to the Shore Village Museum in Rockland, and the island is now owned by the Audubon Society.

The society mans the island during the summer months and has re-established a rookery for puffins there. It has become an important research center for the study of sea birds. The island is off-limits to the general public.

And Brackett has changed, too. After attending a leadership school in 1976, he learned "to become more aware of my environment" and "that there's more to life than a job."

Married 28 years, he and his wife, Jackie, have two daughters. Brackett admits his family "has put up with an awful lot." They are his top priority today, but he still leaves to fight major wildland fires across the U.S.

"I can't retire or I'll have to live somewhere else for two days every so often," he laughs, knowing he'll continue to live on the edge of danger.