CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY

1796 - Frances Small sold 10 acres of land, known as the "Truro clay pound" to the U.S. Government. A temporary structure was erected.

1797 - The first lighthouse on Cape Cod was built after a lobby of local residents, led by Rev. Levi Whitman of Wellfleet, had caught the attention of the federal government by citing all the shipwrecks that had occurred there. First lit on June 12, 1797, it was a 30' brick tower, 3 1/2' thick at the base, with 15 whale oil lamps. Each lamp had a 15" reflector; these were arranged in 2 rows, eight lamps on the lower, seven on the upper. Each lamp held one quart of oil, which was enough for one night. It marked the first landfall on the transatlantic route to Boston.
A brick keeper's house was also built

1800 - A rotating eclipser, or screen, was placed in the lens room. It revolved slowly around the lens, creating a flashing light. Each revolution took 8 minutes.

1807 - The eclipser was removed because it was said to obscure the light. Issac Small, a descendant of Frances Small, lived nearby and recorded local maritime history relating to the Light. (The Small homestead is presently abandoned, and is located to the northwest of the station in the adjacent lot, near the edge of the cliff.)

1832 - a second lighthouse may have replaced the first; this is uncertain.

1833 - D. Whitney in his book, The Lighthouse, states, "The first lighthouse was built at Cape Cod as early as 1798, but was rebuilt first in 1833 and again in 1853." Thoreau in his 1857 journal states, "Small says the lighthouse was built about 60 years ago. He knows by his own age. A new lighthouse was built some twenty-five years ago (1832). They are now building another on the same spot."

1839 - 21" parabolic reflectors, a new lantern, deck, and chandelier were installed. This may be the rebuilding of the tower that Thoreau and Whitney refer to.

1840 - The iron doors to the tower which read "Truro Lighthouse" were added, possibly with the reconstruction of the tower.

1853 - Enoch S Hamilton was keeper. In his journal, he recorded 1,200 vessels passing Highland within a 12-day period.

1857 - The present 66' brick tower was built for $15,000. The existing light and keeper's house were razed. A one-story 40' X 43" equipment shed and a 15'8" X 27'8" boathouse were built, to be moved twice over the years.
A First Order Fresnel lens, costing $30,000, was installed. It had a visibility of 23 miles, was 12' high and 6' in diameter. A system of cog wheels, springs, and vacuum pumps supplied oil to four wicks, which were fed oil from a tank beneath the burner (in the lamp room). Three keepers were needed to tend the light, instead of one.

1860 - Whale oil lamps in the lighthouse were converted to kerosene.

1899 - The Boston Chamber of Commerce appropriated $15,000 to change the fixed lens to a flashing one of greater intensity.

1901 - A new First Order Fresnel lens was installed, with 820,000 candle-power. It consisted of 36 prisms arranged in tiers; it was 12' high and 9' in diameter, and rested on a 300-lb. bed of floating mercury in an iron base.

1902 - Reference to a watchtower on the property.

1904 - A U.S. Naval Radio station was established at Highland Light.
1909 - A complete water system was installed.
1915 - A new watchtower was built.
1919 - The Compass Station was established at Highland, advising ships by radio of their location.
1932 - A two-story watchtower, 10' X 16", was built. The lamps were replaced by a 1,000-watt electric bulb, which greatly intensified the light.
1936 - A four-car 21' X 42' garage was built.
1945 - The Fresnel lens was dismantled and scrapped. A 36" double drum lens was installed with 4,000,000 candlepower.
1976 - The Massachusetts Historical Commission considered the collapse of the watchtower and oil house, due to erosion, a "loss in cultural properties."
1980 - The exterior of the lighthouse and entry were repainted.
1986 - Coast Guard plans to automate Highland Light; this will not alter the appearance of the light. The dwellings will continue to be used as Coast Guard housing.