SCITUATE LIGHTHOUSE'S FIRST KEEPER

By John J. Galluzzo



Earliest known photograph of Scituate Lighthouse. Author's collection.

The Massachusetts coast was a dark place two centuries ago. Boston Lighthouse had been lit for the first time in 1716, but it did not survive the American Revolution. The governing body that emerged from the war, that new nation formed on the strength of its belief in every man's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rebuilt it in 1783. Just before the war, a new light station at the end of Duxbury Beach, on a headland called the Gurnet (named for a fish known by the Pilgrims back home in England), was erected in 1768 to guard Plymouth Harbor to the south. Out on Cape Cod, at the urging of the Boston Marine Society, a gathering of sea captains and merchants dedicated to improving the navigational framework of Boston Harbor and its approaches, the new government built Highland Light at Truro in 1797. For another 14 years, that was it.

In 1811, though, rumors began of the pending construction of a lighthouse on the South Shore. Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin confirmed those rumors with a letter to Henry Dearborn, superintendent of lighthouses in Massachusetts, on March 27 of that year: "Sir, I have received your letter of the 8th inst., and enclose herewith proposals for building a light house, etc., at the entrance to Scituate Harbor, which you will cause to be published in one of the papers printed at Boston." The bidding war would begin, with Dearborn tasked with assessing the "stability of the persons" submitting offers to take on the task of building the new lighthouse.

Once rumors of a lighthouse began, so, too, did the rush to get the federally appointed position of the first Scituate Lighthouse keeper. In mid-April, Captain Andrew Churchill of Plympton hand-delivered a letter to Dearborn from a supporter, Henry Warren, recommending Churchill "as a suitable person to keep the light house at Scituate. I have not the pleasure of personal knowledge of him," Warren continued, noting, though, that people of whom he thought very highly thought very highly of Churchill. Churchill followed up with a letter of his own a week later. Referring to a rumor that the name of Scituate's Simeon Bates had been forwarded to Dearborn as the man for the job, he wrote, "Bates is master of a vessel...has a home...which if I had the same I think that I should not wish to take the light house from him if he was in my position." Playing the underdog role, perhaps begging for a bit of charity, Churchill made his pitch.

Another dog would enter the fight, though, a few weeks later, when a letter signed by more than two dozen prominent Scituate and Hingham citizens made its way to Dearborn's desk calling for the ascension of Cornelius Bates to the position of keeper. "We, the subscribers, being acquainted with the above Cornelius Bates, do approve of his being appointed keeper of the lighthouse about to be built at Scituate Harbor, he is a man of sobriety, industry and economy." Among the names on the list were Scituate's Ebenezer Bailey, the town clerk, and Israel Litchfield, the West End store owner for whom the intersection known as "Itchy's Corner" is still named today.

Through July and August, more letters flew in supporting Churchill, including one from Scituate Harbor sea captain Seth Sprague. On September 12, though, the picture got even murkier. Jesse Dunbar of Scituate took it upon himself to note that the men who signed the Cornelius Bates petition "live remote from this part of the town," meaning the harbor village, an apparent affront to the sea captains who would be depending upon the light for safety when entering the harbor. Furthermore, he said, "Captain Simeon Bates, a seafaring man, will if necessary obtain double the signatures and as respectable at least as the others."

Finally, in October, while the light was well near completion, a fourth man—and a third one with the surname Bates—sent in an application for the keeper's job. Josiah Bates found yet another angle from which to attack the problem. "During the Revolutionary War I was a soldier, a part of the time in the regiment of General (then Colonel) Knox and in other regiments during the whole war. Since that time I have been employed at different times as Pilot of Armed Vessels belonging to the U.S. and am now employed in the Marine Hospital...Under such circumstances from your well-known patriotism, willingness to assist those who have been Servants of their Country, I have been induced to believe that you would render me any service consistent with the good of our country in your power." The Boston Marine Society asked for a delay in the lighting of the lamp on October 23, targeting April 1, 1812, as the society wanted to be assured of a proper "distinguishing mark" for the lighthouse.



Portrait of Henry Dearborn. Courtesy of Martha's Vineyard Museum.

In the end, on December 12, the job went to Simeon Bates, oddly the one man from whom we have no surviving letter of application for the position. Because of his acceptance of the job, we now have the story of the "American Army of Two," in which his daughters chased away the British navy with a fife and a drum during the War of 1812.

But that is a story for another day.



Scituate Lighthouse in August 1995. USLHS archive photo by Jim Wolfrum.