

Death of a Light Station:
Mass. Audubon Allows History to Crumble

By Jeremy D'Entremont

The best known lighthouse location in the vicinity of Rockport on Massachusetts' Cape Ann is Thacher Island, with its dramatic twin towers. Rockport's "other" lighthouse on Straitsmouth Island can be seen from the end of Bearskin Neck, a tourist-friendly cluster of shops, as well as from sightseeing cruises and whale watches. When people see the deplorable condition of the keeper's house on the island, a frequent query is "Why don't they do something about that?" Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to this simple question.

Rockport's vital granite business began in the 1820s, joining the fishing industry to put the town on the map. A 19-foot brick lighthouse tower, along with a brick keeper's dwelling, was built on Straitsmouth Island in 1835 to help guide mariners into the harbor at nearby Pigeon Cove. A new 1 1/2 story keeper's house was built in 1878, and the present 37-foot brick tower replaced the old one in 1896.

Most of Straitsmouth Island, other than the lighthouse, was sold into private hands in the 1940s. A man named Frederic Gibbs then donated the island, including the keeper's house, to the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) in the 1960s. The deed stated that the island was "to be used to improve the number and variety of wildlife inhabiting the sanctuary, and especially of native species." It went on to state that "such uses may include the construction of appropriate observational, interpretive and educational facilities designed to further public knowledge and exploration of wildlife and other natural resources."

The Massachusetts Audubon Society is a separate organization from the National Audubon Society. MAS manages over 29,000 acres of wildlife habitat. The Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary is their largest property, encompassing 2,800 acres. Straitsmouth Island is not very close to the sanctuary, but it is officially part of it since there are no other sanctuaries that are closer.

The lighthouse continued as an active aid to navigation after its automation in 1967, but the abandoned house went quickly downhill. In the early 1980s a local man named Charles Costello did some renovation of the dwelling only to have his work immediately ruined by vandals. He once replaced some windows and saw them broken within days.



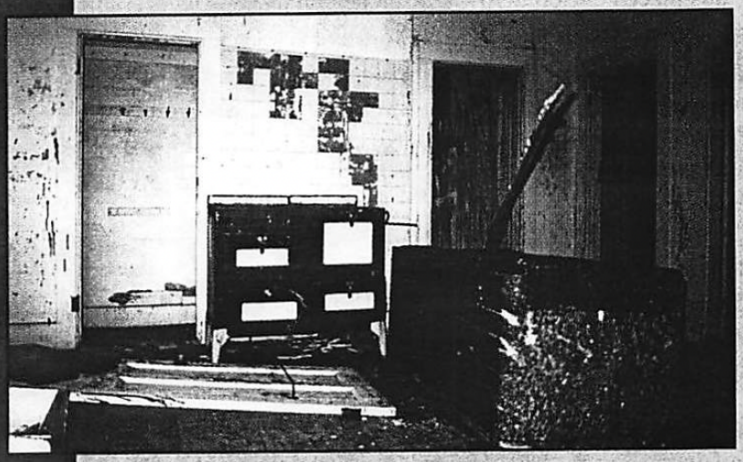
This shed next to the keeper's house has collapsed. Could the house be next?

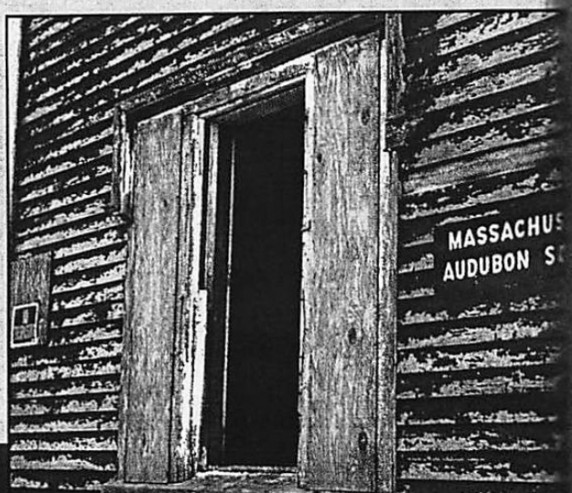
In 1983, there was another short-lived restoration effort by four other young men who planned to live in the house. The men were a bit startled by the island's wildlife. One of them told the Gloucester *Daily Times,* "The first time my brother came out he yelled, 'Hey, look at the seal on the rock!' Not until I saw the tail did I know it was a rat." At the time there were two feet of rat and seagull droppings on the floor of the house.

The keeper's house is now open to the elements and looks like a bad winter could turn it into rubble. Jay Hyland of the Lighthouse Preservation Society, based in Newburyport, Massachusetts, tried to convince the Massachusetts Audubon Society in recent years to restore the keeper's house for use as a retreat. MAS opposed this, feeling that the island's value as a natural resource would suffer if public access was allowed.

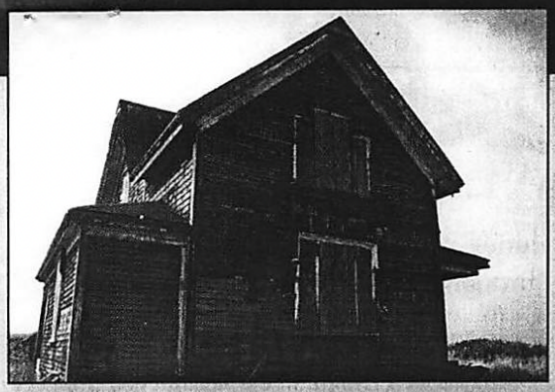
MAS' primary purpose is to maintain Straitsmouth Island as a bird sanctuary. For the few people that do land at Straitmouth,

Falling plaster and broken doors are a small sampling of the deplorable condition of the keeper's house. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.





The no trespassing signs seem to be little deterent for the vandals. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.





The previous lighthouse on Straitsmouth Island in a late 19th century view. From the collection of Edward Rowe Snowe, courtesy of Dorothy Bicknell.

landing is very difficult as the landing ramp was removed years ago. And walking around on the poison ivy-covered island is no picnic. MAS is also not in favor of any kind of permanent landing facility on the island, feeling that this would be an invitation to vandals and would endanger nesting birds (mostly gulls and cormorants). The only official access to the island is through occasional MAS kayaking trips.

Seeing that restoration of the house in its current location was problematic, Jay Hyland last year approached MAS with the idea of moving the house to the mainland, not to Rockport but to the city of Newburyport, a neighbor to the north. Newburyport has a great deal of well-preserved maritime history that includes a lighthouse and keeper's house on Plum Island, as well as a pair of range lighthouses in the downtown area. MAS officials liked the idea, so Hyland approached the Massachusetts state legislature with the plan, and $111,300 was included for the move in a supplemental budget for capital projects, pending approval of Governor Jane Swift.

In June 2001, letters were sent by MAS and the Lighthouse Preservation Society to officials of the Town of Rockport. In his letter Hyland stated that moving the house to Newburyport would "underscore the rich maritime heritage of this seafaring town, and help create a new destination and tourist attraction for the city." Hyland said that an additional $300,000 would probably be needed to renovate the dwelling. In their letter, MAS backed Hyland's plan. MAS officials said that they planned to give the house to the Lighthouse Preservation Society for free.



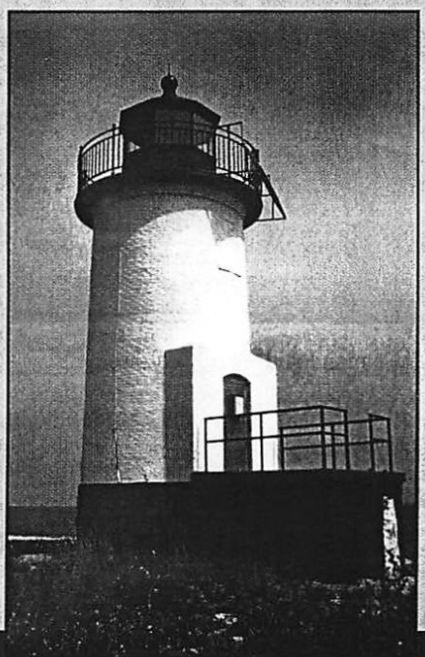
Unfortunately, the weather and birds aren't the only enemies to preservation here. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.

Rockport's town officials had other ideas about the proposed move. In fact, the letters met with so much opposition in Rockport that the Massachusetts Audubon Society backed off from the plan. "We're going to abide by the community's sentiment," said Jack Clarke, director of advocacy for MAS. The proposed move seems to have ignited a spark in Rockport, however, and there may be a happy ending to all this.

In July 2001, plans were underway for State Senator Bruce E. Tarr and two Rockport selectmen to visit Straitsmouth Island (once the gulls' nesting season is over) for an inspection of the house. Where this will lead is far from certain, but hopefully something positive will result.

For his part, Hyland has not given up on the idea of moving the house. Based on the past problems of vandalism and the lack of human presence on the island, he sees no other solution. He plans to accompany the Rockport officials to the island to discuss the possibilities.

A restored keeper's house on Straitsmouth Island would be a major improvement of the local seascape for thousands of boaters, tourists and local residents of Cape Ann. But given the obstacles, moving it and restoring it onshore might be the next best thing. At least the issue is now very much in the public eye and on the table of local officials.



The tower at Straitsmouth Island. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.



Large gaping holes in the siding and open windows make the keeper's house a shelter for the many seagulls who now call the structure their home. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.