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The Lighthouses of Chatham

by Grace Hardy.

The first settlements in America extended all along the eastern coast of the North American continent and wrecks were frequent with many lives lost every year. For this reason the colonists attacked the lighthouse problem very early in their history.

When the Federal Government took over the colonial light houses in 1789 there were eight coast lights along the shores but no other aids to navigation. Five additional lights were built within the next few years those at Chatham being included among this number.

The proposal for this set of two light houses is printed in the "Columbian Centinel" published in Boston on Saturday, June 18, 1808. A copy of this paper is in the files of the Chatham Historical Society.

These light houses and the dwelling house for the keeper were built on the bluff called James's Head, about where the ruins of the second towers now are. They were finished in 1808.

The proposal states that the towers "shall be of wood and the form octagon. They were to be set upon

heavy wooden skids five feet from the ground, the skids to range nearly east and west. These were placed in such a manner as to facilitate the removal of the light houses, which from the frequent shifting of the bar would probably become necessary as they must at all times stand in a range for vessels passing over Pollock Rip shoals. It was necessary to move these only once, however.

The proposal further specifies that the octagonal pyramids are to be "of good oak or white pine timber without sap, and to be twenty-two feet in diameter at the commencement. The height of the pyramid to be forty feet from the stonework foundation to the floor of the lantern where the diameter is to be eight feet." The lantern was to be six feet six inches in diameter and seven feet high from the floor to the bottom of the dome or roof; and to have a roof three feet three inches in height and covered with sheet copper.

The rafters of the lantern (which were to be of iron) were framed into an iron hoop over which was ac

copper funnel, through which the smoke could pass into a copper ventilator, in the form of a ball, sufficient to contain forty gallons, and large enough to secure the funnel against rain. The ventilator was turned by a large vane, so that the hole for venting the smoke would always be to the leeward.

The stairs leading from the ground floor to the lantern were of heavy planks and double boards and was guarded by a good hand-railing.

A complete iron lantern in the octagon form was provided for each lantern room with a complete set of lamps suspended by good and sufficient iron chains, so hung that the lamps could be raised or lowered at pleasure. There were also a sufficient number of air pipes to insure a steady and clear light.

Each of the eight sides of the lantern was fitted with a sash of iron made so strong that it would not bend or work with the wind. These sashes were divided into eighteen squares to be set

with strong glass of first quality. One of these sashes was hung on hinges for a convenient door to go out on the platform which was built out from the lantern and surrounded by an iron ballustrade three feet high.

Entrance to the lantern was by a trap door covered with copper. A close stove was placed in each lantern because sometimes the keeper had to remain in the lantern all night if the weather was so severe that there was danger of the light blowing out.

Each light house was to have three coats of paint, the last two of which were white.

There was a separate proposal for the dwelling house to be built for the keeper.

It was to be of one story, seventeen feet front by twenty-six feet from front to rear with a cellar under it. The house was divided into three rooms, a parlor, kitchen, and bed room. There was a good chimney, two fire places and an oven, and two mantle trees. There were stairs leading down cellar and into the unfinished chamber above.

And so Chatham's first lighthouses were built. They were finished that same year — 1808 — and the keeper and his family moved into the dwelling house.

The first keeper was Samuel Nye. Joseph Loveland followed him, and Samuel Stinson from Eastham followed him. If there were other keepers of this first set of lighthouses I do not know their names, as all the records were removed to the U. S. Custom House in Boston during World War I.

In 1840, a second set of towers was built, this time of brick. I believe these were very nearly on the same location as the first ones. Collins Howes was the first keeper of the brick towers. He was followed by Simeon Nickerson. On Mr. Nickerson's death, his widow continued as keeper until Charles Smith took over about 1861. On Dec. 6, 1871 my grandfather, Capt. Josiah Hardy, 2nd became keeper after having served one year as assistant-keeper. It is from his diary that I have gathered these facts concerning the lighthouses of Chatham.

Although the diary records an astonishing number of wrecks all along the coast with many lives lost, apparently all went well with the lights until the fall of 1870.

At that time the mainland extended far beyond the site of the lighthouses and the coast was very bold to the eastward — in some places it was forty to fifty feet high. Below this bank were the wharves where the vessels and packets used to load and unload their passengers and cargoes.

On the fifteenth of November, 1870 a terrific storm came on with north-easterly gales and extremely high tides. All day long the wind and rain continued and the tides ran higher. Faces grew anxious, fishermen made their boats as secure as possible and all eyes scanned the sea for wrecks and coming danger to the seafarers.

Suddenly came the cry, "The beach has broken through!" and sure enough, the angry waves were washing in around the piles of Hardy's wharf. By the time the storm was over, both wharves had washed away. The brick towers then stood just 2, 2 & 2 ft from the edge of the bank.

For many years a barrier beach has been making up eastward of Cape Cod and so the shoreline at Chatham has changed very little. In 1870, however, it was a different story. The waves of the Atlantic were pounding the mainland and every northeasterly or easterly storm took off some of the lighthouse bank.

Capt. Hardy's diary makes frequent mention of severe storms and many wrecks but there is no entry concerning the further encroachment of the sea upon the land until four years later when he wrote: "November 23, 1874, a day of storms ushered in by a northeast wind and high course of tides." and he adds that the lighthouse bank has suffered severely in this storm. On Dec. 21, 1874, he wrote, "The distance was measured today; from foot of south tower to the edge of the bank was 190 ft. 38 ft. in width has been cut off since 1870."

From this time, the distance from the foot of the towers to the edge of the bank was measured frequently and reported to headquarters, but

it was not until 1877 that those in authority in Washington became much concerned about it.

The diary states that on Feb. 17, 1877, Mr. Lunt of the Harbor Commission visited this station to witness the wearing away of the shore line. At that time the distance from the foot of the south tower to the bank was 95 ft. By March 31, it was 84 ft.

On April 25, Mr. Frederick Tower arrived to arrange for and lay out the site of the new light houses on the west side of the road. Work on these was begun at once. By August 31, the distance was only 54 ft. The new towers were 100 ft. apart from center to center.

The engineers moved the lenses from the old towers on Sept. 6 of that year and the new towers were lighted that night for the first time. At that time they were burning lard oil in the lamps. The dwelling house for the keeper was not completed in Nov. 1877.

On the last day of December, 1877 the south tower stood 48 ft. 9 in. from the bank.

The lighthouse tender, Myrtle, landed two barrels of kerosene oil

and new fixtures for the lamps on June 18, 1878, and these new lamps were lighted with kerosene oil for the first time on the night of July 4, 1878.

On Monday, Dec. 15, 1879, at 1 P.M. the old South Tower went over the bank— just eight years and one month since the harbor was broken through. The cistern of the old house went down the bank July 3, 1880, and one year and fifteen days after the Old South Tower fell the last of the east side of the dwelling went.

1881 saw the finish of Chatham's second set of lighthouse towers for on March 26, at 2:30 P.M. the old North Tower fell, leaving a cone-shaped piece standing on the bank. This was fifteen months and eleven days since the South Tower went down.

Capt. Hardy retired after twenty-eight years as keeper of the lights and his place was taken by Charles Hammond. Mr. Allison was the next keeper, followed by Mr. Woodward and then Mr. Gustavus. When Mr. Gustavus retired the Lighthouse Department became a part of the Navy.

Chatham was always known to mariners sailing along our coast as the "Twin Lights" because of our two towers; but on May 15, 1923, one light was discarded, the lantern removed to the lighthouse at Nauset and the north tower torn down. The cement foundation is still on its original site.

South Tower was equipped with a new lens of 20,000 candle power. The lantern burns oil vapor and flashes four times every thirty seconds.

Monomoy Lighthouse was built in 1828 and was used until 1923.

The lighthouse on Harding's Beach was finished June 30, 1880 and was first lighted on July 1. It is no longer in use, but has been replaced by an automatic flashing light.