INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT PLUM ISLAND

1788 Two small wooden lighthouses were built at the entrance of the Merrimac River on Plum Island. These lighthouse towers were lit by spider lamps, a pan of oil with four wicks. Plum Island Light was moved quite often, sometimes considerable distances, because of the shifting sands and the changing channel. Plum Island Light was designated the 11th lighthouse on the North Atlantic coast and the 13th in America.

1789 The lighthouses were ceded to the federal government.

1809 Newburyport Harbor Light (Plum Island Light) was the 1st light in America to be equipped with an Argand lamp.

1855 A Bug Light was erected.

1856 A new Fourth Order Fresnel lens was installed.
One of the original twin lighthouses was destroyed by fire during a thunderstorm.

1864 The "Bug Light" near the channel was moved due to shifting land and channel changes.

1867 One of the two lights was moved 90' to mark a new channel.

1869 The Lighthouses were moved one third of a mile northeast as close to the channel as possible. Apparently, the sands had shifted to such an extent that the lights were so far inland they were difficult to see from the ocean approach.

1870 The Lighthouse Board decided that these lights were of great importance and should have stronger lamps and sturdier materials. During the time period of 1870 to 1872, the light was moved twice and the bug light 4 times.

1874 The towers were moved 75' to the south. From 1874 to 1908, there were more than 100 shipwrecks on or near Plum Island.

1880 Construction began on a stone tower to replace one of the wooden towers.

1881 Charles I. Pettengill of Plum Island inherited the land on which the lighthouses were located, claiming the lighthouses were thereby on private property. A land battle began which was not settled until 1887. The decision by former U.S. Attorney General George P. Sanger, stated that the land had in fact been ceded to the U.S. in 1790 and that Pettengill had no legal title to it.

1882 Construction of the North jetty started.

1883 Construction of the South jetty started.

1887 Lard oil lamps in the front light were replaced by mineral oil lamps for greater illumination and less maintenance.

1890 The channels shifted extensively and construction of the stone tower halted.

1898 The jetties proved successful and the present white conical tower was built, apparently incorporating parts of one of the original 1788 towers. The south jetty was completed in 1905, the north jetty in 1914.

1910 Keeper Woods took over responsibility for the Black Rocks Range Light from Light-tender William Pierce.

1915 The channel had shifted direction so completely by this time that small range lights were added on the north side of the Merrimack River to aid navigators during the 1920's. During Prohibition, more than 20,000 bottles of bootleg whiskey were confiscated in this immediate area.

1927 The lighthouse was electrified.

1951 The Coast Guard reduced the size of the land surrounding the lighthouse. The keeper's dwelling, the garage and the oil house were turned over to the National Wildlife Management. Only the land immediately surrounding the tower was retained by the Coast Guard.

1981 The inner plaster walls of the tower were stripped to reveal exposed studding and spiral planking. The wooden floor was torn up and a cement floor installed.

1994 August was officially declared lighthouse month.

1995 Friends of Plum Island light leased the tower from Coast Guard.
The lens and electronic equipment are to be maintained by the Coast Guard.

1996 The tower was re-sided , the cat walk resurfaced and a new lightning rod added.
These improvements were undertaken and completed by the Coast Guard.

1998 Present tower's 100th year celebration held on August 1,1998.

PLUM ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE STRUCTURE INFORMATION

Exterior The 50' above sea level white shingled tower is cylindrical, with a black cast iron lens room and sheet metal roof.

Shingles Each exterior shingle reveals 5", and seems to have a random width.

Foundation The original wood foundation was replaced by cement to reinforce the structure. Access is gained into the tower by stepping directly up to the door frame.

Door There are presently two doors: the first, a storm door, is a Z-frameboard door and the second is a four panel wooden door with a round brass handle, the outside door is stained gray, the inside door is natural stain. There is a segmental hood over the doors with copper flashing .

Interior The cement floor of the tower has a radius of 7'2". The interior walls are exposed framing and original diagonal sheathing.

Walls The inside walls appear to have been covered at one time by plaster but it has been removed.

Staircase A full staircase built into the exterior wall has thirty wooden steps and a wooden balustrade that ascends to a landing. The railing and balusters are of polished molded wood, probably hand carved. Each step has a simple moulding under the riser. The steps, all painted grey, have been reinforced on the underside by slender aluminum straps running from the bottom of the step to the railing.

Window The two windows in the tower are located on the first landing and in the lower room. They measure 28" x 42" to the sill, and project outwards with the cant of the tower. These windows are set in 3 ½" at the bottom and 6 ¼" at the top. The casing is 43 ½".

Lamp Room A ten tread boxed wooden ladder rises directly to the lens room, and it has rounded ends, each step is 7 ¾" x 1 ¼" x 25" wide.

Lens Room Access to the round lens room is gained through a wooden trap door. The floor is wood planks, but the walls on the interior and exterior are iron, and the room itself is round.. The diameter of the lens room is about 85". The iron wall rises 42" to the windows. Of the 8 window panes, the one to the northwest has been blacked out (toward the town of Newburyport). Each pane is 36" high, 32" wide on the curve of the wall, and 48" across diagonally. The mullions are 3" x 1 ½". Astragals holding the panes of glass in place are beveled, 1" wide. In the center of the lens room, stands the Fresnel lens which is covered with a green plastic lens. This plastic lens is a 45" high cylinder.

Vents 4 uncovered round vents are located at mid-point on every other wall around the lens room. An iron door leads to the balcony.

Balcony The balcony is sheathed with plywood and covered by a rubber impregnated fiberglass , topped with a sand paint to insure safe footing. Forty one inch high iron posts support two 2 ¼" bands of iron railing 10 ½" above the balcony. There are 24" between posts, which are topped with an iron finial.

Roof The 8 segments of the conical roof are topped by a large ball-shaped vent that originally permitted smoke to escape. A lightning rod is fixed at the peak of the roof.

Plum Island light has been moved at least 25 times since it was built.

PLUM ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

Many of the Plum Island Lighthouse keeper names listed below are familiar to all who live in the area. The families have lived in the surrounding areas since early settlement times.

1790 Abner Lowell

1815 Lewis Lowell

1823 Joseph Lowell

1825 Captain Chandler *

1833 Phineas George

1839 J.S.Greenwood

1849 Phineas George

1857 Franklin Carleton

1861 Solomon Parks

1864 John Putman

1866 Joseph Lowell

1870 Henry Hunt

1873 George W. Stickney

1882 Phelix Doyle

1886 Matthew Barrett

1890 Elliot Hadley

1896 Edwin Hunt

1905 Arthur W. Woods

1923 Captain Howard

1924 George E. Kezer

1939 Harry Dobbins – U.S.C.G.

1945 Edgar Wallace – U.S.C.G.

- The name of Captain Chandler was offered to be keeper of
- Plum Island Light on Nov. 3, 1825. We have not been able to
- Ascertain if the appointment was made or accepted. If you can
- Help us fill in any voids, please send the information to
- P.O.Box 381, Newburyport, MA 01950