

Matinicus Twin Lights

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A sailor approaching lonely Matinicus Rock in the 1800s might have thought he was seeing double. This dangerous, 32-acre ledge, 23-miles off the coast of Maine, had twin lighthouses on it in those days, two wooden towers with two bright beacons in their crowns and a small, cobblestone keeper's dwelling between them.

When the government marked this notorious peril at the entrance to busy Penobscot Bay, it was decided two beacons would serve better than one. The idea was not to produce twice as much light, rather to distinguish the station from neighboring beacons.

A surge of lighthouse construction in the late 1700s and early 1800s had resulted in a string of much-needed sentinels, stretching from the Canadian Maritimes down to the Florida Keys. But all of these lights were white and fixed, and anyone not intimately familiar with the coast easily mistook one light for another.

The simplest answer would have been a system of flashing lights with characteristics signals. A French physicist was at work on this technology about the time Matinicus Twin Lights went into service. It would be another 20 years, however, until flashing lights were adopted for use in U.S. lighthouses.

Colored lights were also a poor substitute, since their beams could not be seen as far at sea as white lights. To solve the identification problem, the Lighthouse Establishment opted for an old European system of using multiple lights in places where there were many beacons in view at once.

Seven twin light stations were eventually built in the United States at places like Navesink, New Jersey; Cape Ann, Bakers Island, and Plymouth, Massachusetts; and Cape Elizabeth, Maine. There was also one triplet station built at Nauset Beach, Cape Cod.

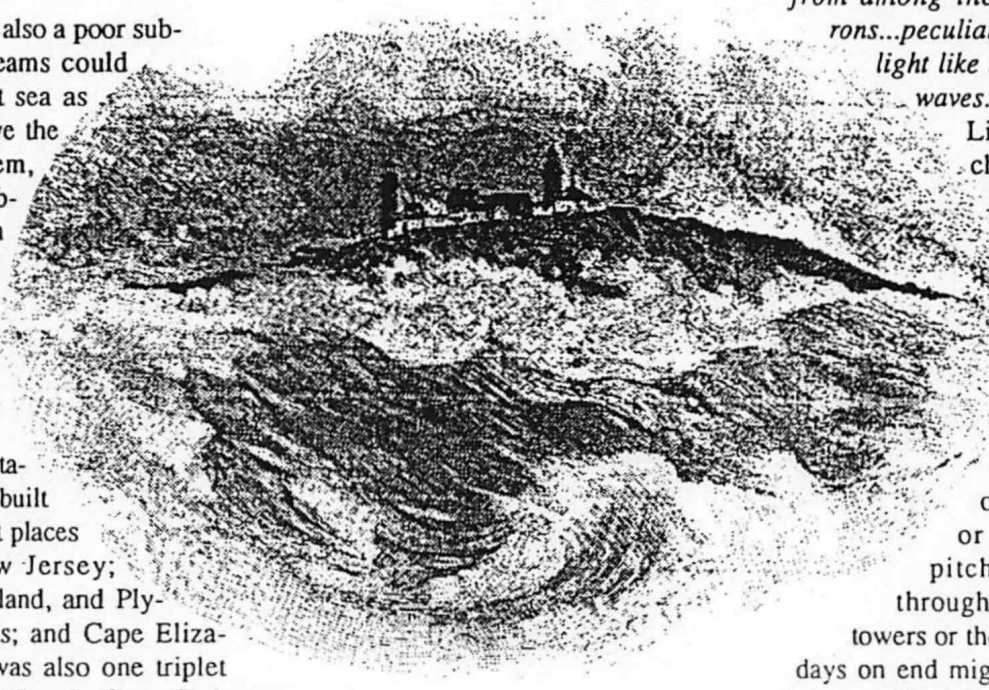
Matinicus Twin Light Station, built in 1827, was among the double beacons which helped ease the confusion between the dozen or more sentinels in the Gulf of Maine.

Matinicus' first towers, flimsy wooden structures attached to either end of the keeper's house, deteriorated quickly. Within a decade they were replaced with more substantial stone towers. The continual pounding of sea against the rock soon undermined these new towers and sent architects back to their drawing boards for a third try.

This time, granite blocks were carefully hewn and the courses tightly bound together to form two cylindrical towers that still stand sturdy today. These were built about 180-feet apart, since research had revealed twin lights placed too close together tended to merge into one beam when viewed from just a few miles offshore. Due to the severe weather on Matinicus Rock, each tower was connected to the keeper's dwelling by a covered passageway.

The station was soon dubbed one of Maine's most attractive, though it was also called the most desolate because of its distance from the mainland. Life was hard there— a world of gray boulders, gray sea, and gray towers. Rough seas made trips ashore almost impossible for the better part of each year. Keepers learned to make provisions and oil stretch, since the supply vessel sent by the Lighthouse Service could seldom make a landing.

Still, passerby and short-term visitors found it an idyllic spot. Journalist Gustav Kobbe, writing for **Century Magazine** in the 1880s described Matinicus Twin Lights as: *"Rising with an antique grace from among their picturesque environs...peculiarly fitted to shed their light like a benediction upon the waves."*



Likely Kobbe would have changed this opinion of "The Rock", as many keepers nicknamed Matinicus, if his visit had lasted more than a few days or coincided with the arrival of a horrendous Nor'easter. Seeing storm waves crash over the keeper's house, or hearing the high-pitched shriek of wind through every crevice in the towers or the fog signal droning for days on end might have turned "grace" into "gruel".

Among the earliest families to live at Matinicus Twin Lights were the Burgesses. Their heirs would occupy the station for generations. Patriarch, Samuel Burgess, was appointed lightkeeper in 1853, and with him to the rock came his invalid wife and five children. The oldest child, a son, soon left to work with local fishermen, leaving the greater burden of help to the next oldest child, a girl of fourteen named Abbie.

Though of slight build and condemned to wear a skirt, Abbie diligently learned to handle the station boat and tend the two light towers, in addition to doing the house chores her mother was unable to do. When Abbie's father was away, which he frequently was due to his wife's need for medicine, Abbie alone tended the lights and cared for her younger sisters and mother. By all reports, she did an expert job, and her courage and devotion to the lights earned her special praise from New England seamen.

In January 1856, when Abbie was seventeen, a severe spring storm swept up the Maine Coast. The day before, Keeper Burgess had rowed to little Matinicus Island, 9-miles away, to get supplies. He was unable to return for four weeks due to rough seas, but every night he looked across the turbulent water separating him from his family and saw the twin lights shining brightly. Abbie kept the lamps clean and burning, even when the sea washed into the house and forced her to move the family into one of the light towers.

Abbie's joy were the hens she raised in a coop at the north end of the rock. They provided eggs for the family, but they were also pets. During the famed 1856 storm, Abbie braved hurricane wind and spume to rescue the hens. A year later, during another storm when she again tended the lights alone, the eggs laid by the hens kept the family from starvation.

Because lightkeepers' positions were, for many years, politically controlled, Samuel Burgess lost his job with the 1860 presidential election, due to his party ties. He turned the lighthouse keys over to Captain John Grant in 1861 and left Abbie at the rock to acquaint the new keeper with the station.



Abbie Saves the Chickens
engraved by Albert Blosse

Abbie was by now a handsome woman of twenty-two, and quite skilled at both housekeeping and lightkeeping. Captain. Grant arrived with his son, Isaac, who was to be the assistant keeper. Isaac, a little older than Abbie, was immediately smitten. Abbie's affection for him must have been equal, for the two were married in the lantern of one of the light towers a short time later.

Abbie was appointed 2d assistant keeper. Four children were born before she and Isaac left Matinicus Rock in 1875 to become the keepers of Whitehead Lighthouse, near Rockland, Maine. They served here another 15 years before retiring. Life away from the lights did not agree with Abbie though, and she died a short time later. A small lighthouse marks her gravestone in Maine's Spruce Head Cemetery.

Many keepers have come and gone at Matinicus Rock since Abbie Burgess Grant, but none are so well-remembered. In 1923, a cost-conscious Bureau of Lighthouses discontinued the north beacon at Matinicus Rock and gave the south tower a flashing characteristic. Coast Guard keepers took over the civilian positions in 1939 and tended the single south tower until the 1970s when Matinicus Light was made automatic.

Today, ornithologists and interns in the National Audobon Society's "Puffin Project" occupy the old keeper's quarters.

The rock has become the focus of an exciting experiment to return the Atlantic puffin to its native home in the islands of Maine. This comical seabird, with penguin-like waddle and buffoon face, rears its young in burrows of Matinicus Rock, then flies away to winter at sea. For these creatures, at least the beacon at Matinicus signals a happy future.

