

**MVMUSEUM**

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## Martha's Vineyard Lighthouses Part 2

East Chop

Edgartown

Cape Poge



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## ON BEING THE RIGHT SIZE

This issue of the *MV Museum Quarterly* contains the second half of *Lighthouses of Martha's Vineyard*, which covers the East Chop, Edgartown Harbor and Cape Poge lights. It complements the first half, which appeared as the November 2019 issue. The two halves will, in time, be combined within a new cover and sold as a single publication.

When that happens, *Lighthouses of Martha's Vineyard* will take its place alongside Dorothy Scoville's *Shipwrecks of Martha's Vineyard* (1972) and Arthur R. Railton's *Walking Tour of Historic Edgartown* (1986) in the ranks of Museum-sponsored publications that fall, in length and structure, somewhere between journal articles and traditional full-length books. The boundaries of that gray area (which, in the days when pulp magazines ruled the newsstand, also included novelettes and novellas) are neither well-defined nor of great importance. What matters is that the publications that fall within it fill a need.

Even in this age of digital distribution, "collecting" a series of articles spread over multiple issues of a journal can be complicated. Nor, however, does every exploration of Martha's Vineyard history and culture need an entire book in which to spread its wings and cover the material at hand. Pamphlets, like the one that this issue and its predecessor will one day become, serve that need for an in-between form of publication: long enough to serve the needs of the topic, short and self-contained enough to keep in print economically.

*Lighthouses of Martha's Vineyard* is, we believe, a topic ideally suited to a pamphlet-length exploration. It will, we hope, be the first in a long series, and we invite suggestions for future subjects of interest.

— A. Bowdoin Van Riper

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD MUSEUM QUARTERLY

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Special Edition

Martha's Vineyard Lighthouses  
PART TWO

WRITTEN & EDITED BY A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

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# East Chop Light (1869)

MARTHA'S VINEYARD has four prominent headlands along its northern shore: Gay Head, Cape Poge, West Chop, and East Chop. It took twenty years—from 1798 to 1818—for lighthouses to be established on the first three, but another sixty before the government agreed to place a beacon atop the fourth. It is hard, now, to imagine Telegraph Hill without its conical iron tower and flashing green light, but for most of the nineteenth century, those who controlled the Lighthouse Board's purse strings saw no need for it. It might never have been built at all, but for the ingenuity and single-minded determination of a merchant-ship captain who thought differently.

East Chop has, in a sense, always been the odd-one-out among Vineyard lighthouses. It was the last light station to be established on the Vineyard, but the first with a cast iron tower (pre-dating the one at Edgartown by 60 years), the first to be electrified (1922) and the first to be automated (1933). It is the only Vineyard lighthouse to have flashed a green light, and the only one to have had its tower painted brown, leading to its fond nickname of “the chocolate lighthouse.” It is the only lighthouse on the Vineyard that still stands on the original, unaltered parcel of land allocated to it, and (paradoxically) the only one whose structure has been completely replaced twice.<sup>1</sup> It is the youngest, by forty years, of the five surviving Vineyard lighthouses, but it has had more distinct light “aspects” (six)

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<sup>1</sup> The original four-acre parcels purchased for the Gay Head, West Chop, and Cape Poge light stations have been wholly or partly lost to erosion, and the stone base of the Edgartown Harbor Light—once an artificial island a quarter-mile from shore—is now buried amid a still-accreting beach (see Chapter 6). The stone from the tower of the first (1817) West Chop Light was reused to build the second (1846) tower, and it seems likely that at least some of the wood from the first (1802) Cape Poge Light found its way into the second (1844) one (see Chapter 7).

than the others combined.<sup>2</sup> Its most important distinction, however, is the one tied to its beginnings as a federally funded aid to navigation. It is the only lighthouse on the Vineyard to have begun life as a private venture: the brainchild of Captain Silas Daggett.

### Silas Daggett's Lighthouse, 1869-1878

He was born in Vineyard Haven when it was still known as Holmes Hole: March 29, 1841. His father, Charles, gave his occupation as "mariner" in the 1850 federal census, as did Samuel Brush, one of the three boarders Silas's mother rented rooms to in order to help make ends meet. The census listings for the Daggetts' neighbors tell the same story: mariner . . . mariner . . . boatman . . . boat builder . . . mariner.<sup>3</sup> The Holmes Hole of Silas Daggett's youth was a thriving maritime village. On any given day its harbor was thick with masts belonging to local sloops and schooners and an ever-changing roster of vessels pausing on their way to somewhere else: ports ranging from Halifax to Havana, Manhattan to Marseilles, and everywhere in between. The water dividing Cape Cod from the Vineyard and Nantucket was one of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world, and Holmes Hole existed to serve the needs of those who traveled it.

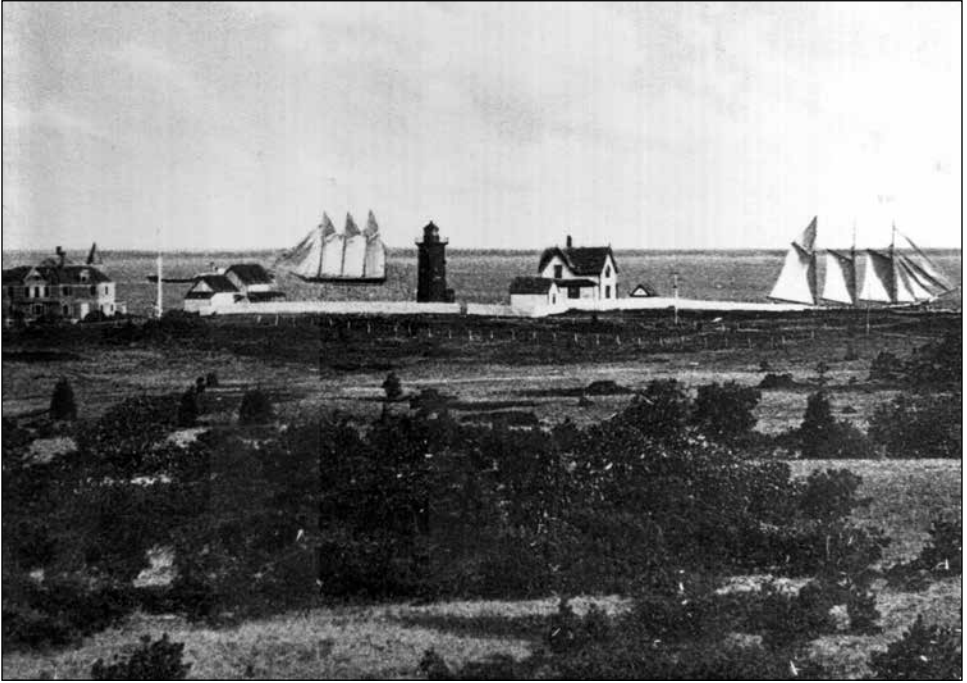
Silas Daggett, age 19, was still in Holmes Hole when the 1860 census was taken, but he must have left soon afterward. It's said that he spent several years in California "when still a very young man," operated a steamboat between Boston and Nantasket, traded fruit in the Caribbean, and worked as a pilot in and around Boston Harbor.<sup>4</sup> He was not yet thirty when, as the decade drew to a close, he began lobbying the Lighthouse Board for a light station at East Chop. The board was non-committal, but—as Daggett knew from his time at sea—the captains, ship owners, and marine insurance companies were far more enthusiastic. Seeing an opportunity, he declared his intention to build a lighthouse himself, and solicited donations from them to defray the expense of creating and maintaining it. The details of who paid, and how much, are hazy, but the result is well-documented: A "circular wooden tower with a railed gallery around the lantern" rose, in 1869, on the bluffs at the top of Telegraph Hill. The name of the place dated to the beginning of the century, the hilltop had been the site of a

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2 Fixed red (1869-1871), flashing red (1872-1878), fixed white (1878-1898), flashing red (1898-1933), flashing green (1933-1962), and occulting green (1962-present).

3 "1850 Census of Tisbury, MA," [history.vineyard.net/tiscen50.htm](http://history.vineyard.net/tiscen50.htm)

4 Goldie P. Sutton, "Thanks to Captain Silas Daggett, the East Chop Light Had Two Lives," *Vineyard Gazette*, October 29, 1971, p. A1; Mark Alan Lovewell, "The ANTS at East Chop Light Are the A-Team in the War on Rust," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 3, 1984, p. B1. Lovewell has Daggett's steamer running from Boston to Nantucket, but there is no record of a scheduled Boston-Nantucket service in the 1860s.



Silas Daggett erected his two privately funded lighthouses in order to make Nantucket Sound safer for the many ships that passed through it. Taken in the 1880s, after East Chop Light had been made an official, government-run aid to navigation, this photograph captures a small percentage of a typical day's traffic.

semaphore telegraph: a tower topped with jointed, flag-tipped arms that could be manipulated by an operator inside the structure, mimicking the motions of a human signalman. One link in a chain of such stations that stretched from Nantucket to Boston, the telegraph was intended to convey information about the arrival of ships.<sup>5</sup> The semaphore tower was long gone by 1869, but the hilltop's visibility—and thus its suitability as a place from which to send signals—had not diminished.

Captain Grafton Luce served as keeper, lighting the three kerosene-fueled lamps just before dusk each night, tending them through the hours of darkness, and extinguishing just after dawn each morning.<sup>6</sup> Fresnel lenses had been installed at the Island's official, government-run light stations more than a decade before, but such modern equipment would have been beyond the reach of Daggett's pass-the-hat operation. He thus fell back on

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5 Christopher Lenney, *Sightseeking: Clues to the Landscape History of New England* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), 32.

6 Sutton, "Captain Silas Daggett." The 1870 census lists two mariners named Grafton Luce, both residents of Tisbury. The elder Captain Luce (1796-1874) died while Daggett's light was still in operation. The younger Captain Luce (1810-1879), who died the year after the government took over the light and brought in their own keeper, is presumed to be the one who held the job.

the older light-amplifying system that the Fresnel lens replaced: a parabolic mirror of highly polished metal, positioned behind each individual lamp, reflected the light rays from the “back” (landward) side of the lamp seaward. A brief description of Daggett’s second (1872) lighthouse at East Chop, included in the Lighthouse Board annual report for 1877, records that the light was generated by “ordinary flat-wick kerosene lamps:” the kind available, off-the-shelf, from any hardware dealer.<sup>7</sup> There is no reason to believe that the first (1869) lighthouse used anything more elaborate. The 1869 light is consistently described as having a flashing red light, which implies a mechanism for rotating the lighting apparatus, but there are no records of how it worked.

Silas Daggett’s first lighthouse at East Chop remained in service a bit more than two years. In December 1871, it was destroyed when some of the kerosene used to fuel its lamps caught fire. One version of the story suggests that Captain Luce was using the kerosene to remove a spot from a rug, a scenario that—based on the advice in nineteenth-century house-keeping manuals—is more plausible than it probably sounds to modern ears.<sup>8</sup> Undaunted, Daggett began planning a new lighthouse and undertook a new round of fundraising. This time, he could point to the previous lighthouse’s two years of successful operations, leaving the maritime interests to draw conclusions about its benefit to them and the desirability of replacing it. The funds came, and the lighthouse rose, quickly. The new building was completed in April 1872, and the new light—steady, rather than flashing, red this time—lit for the first time on the night of May 2. The light, though generated by ordinary kerosene lamps, was amplified by three 21-inch reflectors that, the Lighthouse Board report for 1872 noted, “have been loaned to the keeper” by the government.<sup>9</sup> The new light was said to be visible for 14 miles, but lighthouse historian Wayne Wheeler argues that the height of the tower, curvature of the Earth, and small modest illuminating apparatus would have limited it to no more than 8 miles.<sup>10</sup>

The 1877 report of the Lighthouse Board describes the building, “which served for the keeper’s dwelling and for displaying the light,” as “a slight wooden structure, little better than a shanty.”<sup>11</sup> A stereo photograph taken in the mid-1870s, however, belies that grim assessment. The building in the photograph is an expansive one-and-a-half story home with two-story square tower above the door to house the light. It has four visible windows, including one in the front wall of the tower and one in a dormer projecting

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7 “Lighthouse Board Notes: East Chop” [in VREF 1113.001]

8 Wheeler, “East Chop Light,” *The Keeper’s Log*, Fall 2012, 8-9, on p. 8.

9 “Lighthouse Board Notes”

10 Wheeler, “East Chop Light,” 8.

11 Lighthouse Board Notes”



Silas Daggett's second lighthouse, shown in a period stereoview, was an elaborate structure that anticipated the style of the summer homes that would come to surround its cast-iron successor. Courtesy of Harvey Garneau, Jr.

from the Mansard-style roof, and an elaborate central chimney with an arched brick cap. The massing of the building, and the Gothic styling of the tower window, echo the designs of summer “cottages” on Ocean Park and in the nearby Vineyard Highlands development. The expansive front porch and steps surround, and descend from, the base of the tower on three sides. Far from being a “shanty,” the house is considerably grander than the keepers’ houses in use at Gay Head, West Chop, and Cape Poge in 1877, and, if not larger, certainly more stylish than those at Edgartown. That it was sold and moved, rather than simply demolished, suggests (as does the photograph) that it had also been well-kept.

The government’s willingness to lend Daggett equipment for the 1872 lighthouse (admittedly, obsolete equipment for which it had no other immediate use) suggests not just sympathy with, but outright support for, his operation. Support is also apparent in the Lighthouse Board’s reports from the mid-1870s. The Board declared in 1873 that “as there is no doubt as to the utility of the light, it is recommended that an appropriation for

erecting a fourth-order light be made,” and repeated the sentiment almost verbatim in 1874. The report for 1875 noted that an act approved by Congress on March 3 had appropriated \$5,000 “for establishing a light at this place [East Chop].” Negotiations were declared to be underway in 1875, and reported concluded in 1876, and the deed transferring the land under the lighthouse from Daggett to the federal government was signed on June 27 of that year.<sup>12</sup> The write-up for the 1877 report (which included the assessment of the old building as “a shanty”) reassured anyone who might be reading—taxpayer or eagle-eyed member of Congress—that a “new dwelling and cast-iron tower are in course of construction and will soon be completed.” The 1878 report declared simply: “A new one-and-a-half-story frame dwelling and cast-iron tower have been erected.”<sup>13</sup> The career of the first, and only, privately run lighthouse on Martha’s Vineyard had lasted a little over seven years.

### **An Iron Tower and a One-Armed Man, 1878-1933**

The third lighthouse erected on Telegraph Hill—the one that still stands there today—was modern in every respect. The tower itself was composed of curved, flanged cast-iron plates, made in mainland foundries, shipped to the site and bolted together: the same construction technique used for the towers erected at Nobska Point in 1876 and Ipswich, north of Gloucester, in 1881. The durability of cast iron, and the radically reduced number of joints it allowed for, made cast-iron towers significantly cheaper and easier to maintain than earlier wood and masonry ones. It also allowed designs to be standardized—Nobska Point and East Chop are virtual twins of each other—as a further cost-saving measure, and permitted lighthouses that had outlived their usefulness in one area to be disassembled and moved elsewhere, as the Ipswich tower was moved to Edgartown in 1939 (see Chapter 6). The new tower at East Chop was fitted—like its companions at West Chop, Edgartown, and Cape Poge—with a fourth-order Fresnel lens. The kerosene lamp inside, a 1,000-candlepower model specifically designed for lighthouse use, generated a bright, unwavering white light that complemented the pure-white paint applied to the walls of the tower and keeper’s house. The light from the new lens was nominally visible from as far away as 15 miles.<sup>14</sup>

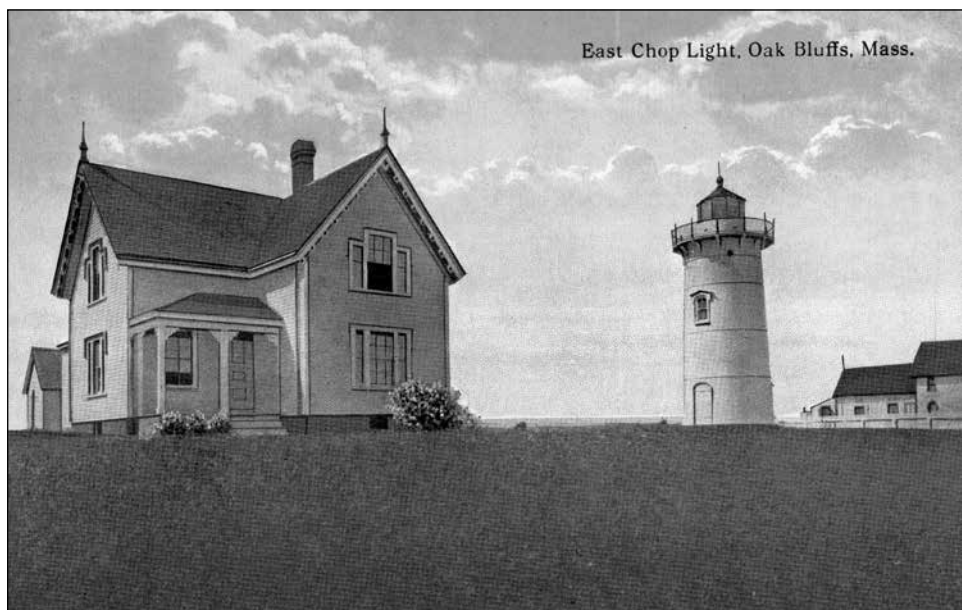
That was the East Chop Light—the third erected on the site in less than a decade—in 1878. The Island’s other lighthouses, once completed, had often gone decades without major alterations, but the rapid pace of technological change in the 1880s led Americans to embrace a culture of con-

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12 There is a photocopy of the deed in VREF 1113.001.

13 “Lighthouse Board Notes”

14 Sutton; “Captain Silas Daggett.”



East Chop Light in its original white paint scheme, which was quickly exchanged for red (quickly weathered to brown) in order to prevent visual confusion with neighboring lighthouses.

tinual adjustments, upgrades, and improvements. The East Chop station may have been the most advanced on the Island, but the Lighthouse Board and its on-site representatives began tinkering with it almost immediately, looking for ways to make it better.

The first, and in some ways most visible, change was the color of the tower itself, which was changed from white to red in 1880. Whatever it had been intended to accomplish, the experiment didn't work.<sup>15</sup> The red weathered to a reddish-brown color under the influence of sun and salt, and rather than invest the work necessary to keep the tower red, they had it repainted in the plain, flat brown color that it wore for the next century.<sup>16</sup> A cesspool and drain were added to the keeper's dwelling in 1882, making it the first Vineyard light station with indoor plumbing, and a protective "storm porch" was built around the tower door in 1895. The 1898 Lighthouse Board report noted that "the fixed white light was improved by changing it to a flashing red." Old-timers must have been amused: Silas Daggett's first light at East Chop had flashed red, too.

The new century brought more changes, notably the conversion of the

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15 One likely explanation is that the red paint was meant to make it instantly distinguishable, in daylight, from the white-painted towers at West Chop and Cape Poge, and that the brown color was a compromise between distinctiveness and low maintenance.

16 Wheeler, "East Chop Light," 9.

lighthouse from kerosene to electricity in 1922.<sup>17</sup> Electricity came to East Chop strikingly early—Edgartown, the next light station on the Island to be electrified, would have to wait another seventeen years, and Gay Head, the last, would have to wait thirty. The change was in keeping with the Lighthouse Board's penchant for tinkering with the station, but it was also a matter of taking advantage of geography. Oak Bluffs, conceived and built as a tourist town, had led the Island in infrastructural amenities since the end of the Civil War. Tourist brochures from the decades bracketing 1900 touted its beaches, parks, and resort hotels, but also its gas heat, electric lighting, and expansive network of paved roads. The town's main electrical plant was located, in the early 1920s, at the corner where Beach Road swung inland to become Eastville Avenue . . . a short distance, down paved roads and past expansive summer homes, from Telegraph Hill.

Oak Bluffs' well-developed infrastructure was an important prerequisite for electrification, but the actual push for the change may have come from keeper George W. Purdy, who took over the station in 1912. Born in Bay of Island, Newfoundland, in 1876, Purdy went to sea as a boy—sailing on Grand Banks fishing schooners in the summers and cargo schooners hauling salted fish to South America and the Caribbean in the winters, returning to northern ports with cargoes of rum and coffee. He shifted his base of operations from Canada to America, sailing from ports in Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island and eventually signing on as a crewman on the lighthouse tender *Azalea*. In 1902, not yet thirty and newly married, he was working in the engine room of the *Azalea* when an unexpected lurch of the deck threw him into the machinery. The accident cost him his right arm, which was amputated just below the shoulder, but he was back at work on the tender within three weeks and remained on her for four-and-a-half more years.<sup>18</sup>

Posted ashore, he served as assistant keeper of the Gay Head Light under Crosby Crocker from 1906-1909, and then as assistant keeper at Sankaty Head Light on the southeastern "heel" of Nantucket from 1909-1912.<sup>19</sup> His tenure at East Chop was far longer—21 years—and a retrospective newspaper article published the year he retired states "when he arrived kerosene lights were in use, but he influenced the government to electrify the station."<sup>20</sup> Electrification reduced Purdy's labors (no more cans of kero-

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17 US Lighthouse Board, "Description of East Chop Light Station," 1922 [in VREF 1113.001].

18 "Interesting Vineyarders: George W. Purdy," *Vineyard Gazette*, November 12, 1926. [in VREF 1113.001].

19 "Gay Head Lighthouse" and "Sankaty Head Lighthouse" at Lighthouse-Friends.com

20 "East Chop Now Is Automatic," *New Bedford Standard-Times*, 1933 [in VREF 1113.001].

sene to carry up the stairs and ladders of the forty-foot tower), but did not eliminate them. The clockwork mechanism that turned the lens still had to be wound, the tower still had to be repainted roughly once a year, and in stormy weather the proper signal flags and signal lights had to be displayed on the 75-foot metal-skeleton tower associated with it.

Purdy, despite his missing limb and the lack of any assistant other than his wife, attended to those tasks vigorously and conscientiously. He was awarded two efficiency stars—recognitions of perfect annual-inspection scores—in his first five years at the station, which enjoyed a reputation for being immaculately kept. Having hired a painter and two assistants to repaint the tower during his first year at the station, he carefully observed what they did and resolved to take on the job himself the following year. Having watched three men finish the job in a day, he concluded that one man should be able to do it in three, but budgeted four because of his missing arm. In the event, it took him a day-and-a-half, and in subsequent years, experience allowed him to reduce that to only a day. The signal tower, which belonged to the Weather Bureau, was another monument to his enterprise. It was located on the shore at Eastville, a mile or two from the lighthouse, when the Bureau asked him, around 1914, to take responsibility for displaying the necessary signals on it. Purdy agreed but, conscious of the distance between them, asked that it be disassembled, moved, and reassembled on the lighthouse grounds. Told, in effect, to “go right ahead” . . . he did.<sup>21</sup>

Electrification allowed for the replacement of the Fresnel lens in 1927, and the installation of a new clockwork mechanism that could go twelve hours (rather than the previous eight) between windings.<sup>22</sup> The last, greatest changes of the era came, however, in June 1933: the optics were altered to produce a green flash rather than a red one, and—more important—the station was automated.<sup>23</sup> Many sources describe the automation of the light as “putting Purdy out of work,” but the Lighthouse Service routinely reassigned keepers whose positions had been made redundant (as, in fact, it did Purdy when Sankaty Head was changed from a two-man to a one-man station in 1912). The fact that East Chop Light was automated in the same year that Purdy turned 65 suggests a more benign explanation: Knowing that he was due to retire, Lighthouse Service officials scheduled the automation of the East Chop station to coincide with his departure from it.

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21 “Interesting Vineyarders: George Purdy.” The article is vague as to whether Purdy did the work himself or directed the labor of others. The latter seems more likely.

22 Sutton, “Captain Silas Daggett,” 1A; “Description of East Chop Light Station;” Wheeler, “East Chop Light,” 9.

23 “East Chop Light Now Automatic.”



Flag and lantern signals flown from masts like this one were a critical means of conveying official information about wind speed, and the intensity of storms, in the years before radios were commonplace aboard ships.

The government gave him the opportunity to continue living in the keeper's dwelling in exchange for a monthly rent of \$100, but Purdy—whether because he was ready to move on, or because he had no desire to live, idly, in the shadow of the lighthouse he had devoted twenty years of his life to maintaining—declined. The Purdys moved away, and the house was demolished in 1934. The signal tower, with no one on site to attend to it, was likely torn down not long after. The lighthouse itself remained: a lonely sentinel in the midst of what was now an improbably large and empty lot.

### **The Tower and the Park, 1934-present**

George Purdy had prided himself on the condition of the grounds as well as the lighthouse, adorning the area with luxuriant rose bushes on which he lavished off-work hours. His departure, inevitably, led to its gradual decline. The keeper of the West Chop Light, and his assistant, kept an eye on the optics and attended to the annual repainting of the tower, but there was no one to prune the rose bushes, or keep the weeds around the base of the fence in check. The base of the cliffs on which the lighthouse stood were also, in the way of all such sea-swept cliffs, being undermined by winter storms. Periodically, another section of the cliff would slump into the waves, and the brink would crumble a little closer to the tower. Writing twenty years or so after the light was automated—forty years after the opening of the Cape Cod Canal had reduced ship traffic in Vineyard

Sound to a shadow of what it had once been—Tisbury School teacher and poet Anthony K. Van Riper captured the feeling of slowly creeping decay:

*Unkempt, it stands within a weedy square  
A dirty brown, three chunky stories high.  
Its neighbors often wish it were not there  
Upon the summer scene. They do not care  
To know this remnant of an age gone by.*<sup>24</sup>

Relief came first in 1955, when the base of the cliff was armored with large stones to slow erosion, and then in 1957, when the government sold the land around the lighthouse to the town of Oak Bluffs for \$3,000 and the cost of surveying it. The sale came with the stipulation that the land be used “for park and/or recreational purposes only,” but the members of the East Chop Association pressed the town to accept it, and—once the transaction was complete—took over the job of maintaining the landscape. Around the same time, an article in the *New Bedford Standard Times* stated that the town of Oak Bluffs was calling “a special meeting to vote whether or not the light was to be put out,” a turn of events that—some said—was accompanied by the portrait of Capt. Silas Daggett that hung in the Tisbury Town Hall mysteriously rattling on its hook.<sup>25</sup>

The lighthouse, of course, was not darkened in 1957, and five years later the “aspect” of the light—the way it looked to observers—was changed from “flashing” (brief displays of light interspersed with longer periods of darkness) to “occulting” (long periods of light punctuated by brief periods of darkness).<sup>26</sup> The tower itself remained brown, a color that had grown familiar with the passage of years but that, in the eyes of some East Chop residents at least, had not eclipsed the memory of the original white. Bosun’s Mate 2nd Class Steve McDonald, the leader of the Coast Guard work party that repainted the tower in 1984 recalled: “We got here with our paint and we heard that some of the neighbors wanted the lighthouse to be painted white. Well, we can’t change it to white. The white might be confused with the West Chop Light. The [new] color is called nut brown. I think people will like it . . . .”<sup>27</sup> The new shade applied to the tower in 1984 was distinctly lighter than the old—more cocoa than chocolate—and combined with the bright white paint used to pick out the window and door frames, it gave the tower a distinctly different look.

The new look lasted, however, for only about four years. The East Chop Light was one of three on the Island being considered, in the early 1980s, for decommissioning and demolition. Seeking to prevent this, the non-

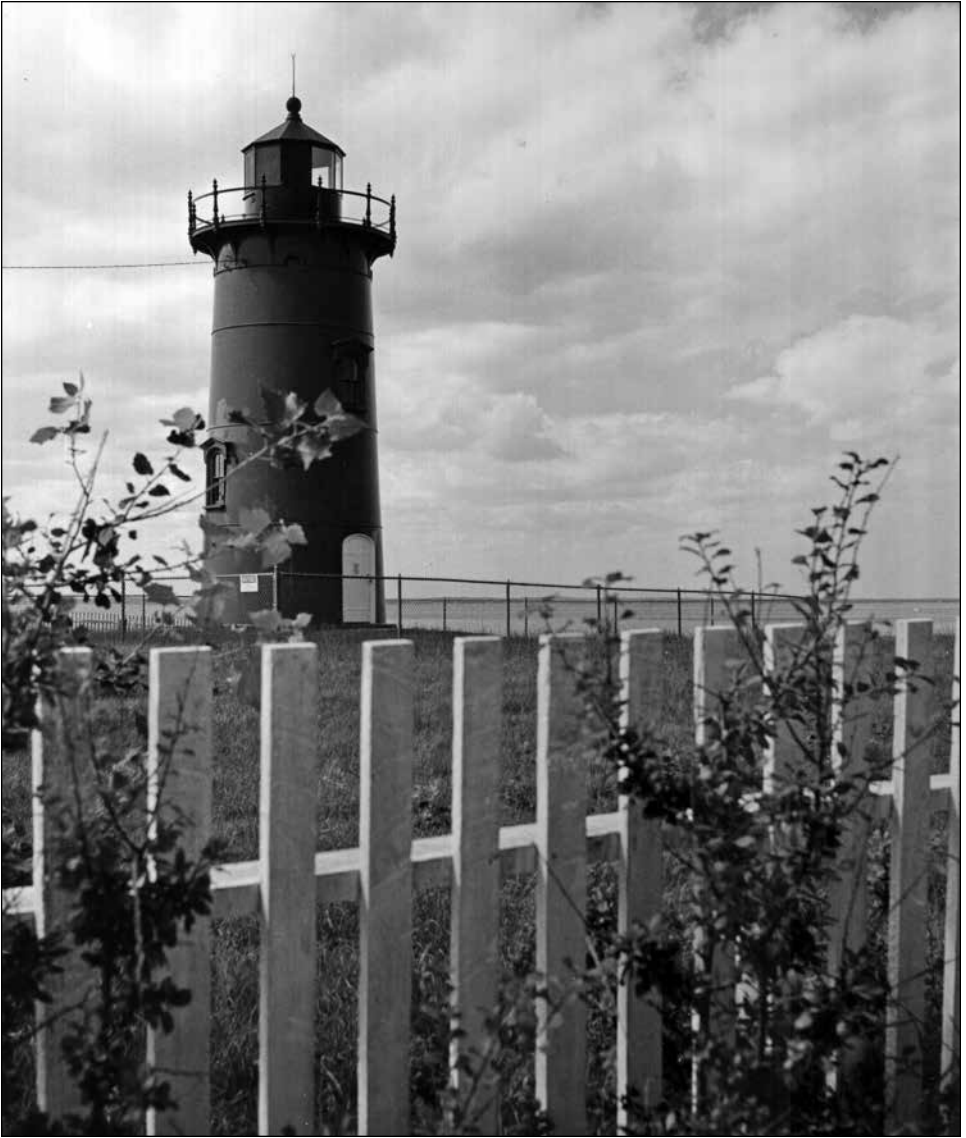
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24 “East Chop Lighthouse,” in *Velvet Tides* (Vineyard Haven: Seven Seas Press, 1964).

25 Sutton, “Captain Silas Daggett,” A1, A6.

26 Anthony K. Van Riper, *Velvet Tides* (Vineyard Haven, Seven Seas Press, 1964).

27 Lovewell, “ANTS at East Chop Light.”



East Chop light in the mid-twentieth century: automated and alone after the destruction of the keeper's house in the mid-1930s, with the public kept at a distance by a wire fence.  
Photograph by Anthony K. Van Riper.

profit Vineyard Environmental Research Institute (VERI) arranged to take over maintenance and management of them under the terms of a 35-year lease. A 1988 assessment of the East Chop Light's condition funded by VERI revealed that the brown-painted tower absorbed more energy from the sun's rays than a white-painted tower would, raising interior temperatures enough to damage the interior of the structure—particu-



Silas Daggett's second East Chop Light, moved and much modified, is now a private home, but the distinctive square tower that once held the light is still clearly visible. Courtesy of the Lewis family.

larly the wooden components. The tower was returned, the same year, to its long-ago original white paint scheme, and has retained it ever since.<sup>28</sup> The Martha's Vineyard Historical Society, now the Martha's Vineyard Museum, took over responsibility for the East Chop Light in 1993, and continues the tradition (established by VERI) of opening it to the public on summer Sunday evenings.

David Lewis—a long-time museum volunteer and current host of those summer openings—walks to the lighthouse from his family's summer home a few blocks away. The house is, fittingly, Silas Daggett's second (1872) wooden lighthouse: relocated, expanded, and updated, but still sporting the distinctive square tower from which kerosene lamps and polished-metal mirrors once flashed a signal to ships sliding by in the darkness.

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28 Wheeler, "East Chop Light," 9.

# Edgartown Harbor Light (1828)

VINEYARD HAVEN Harbor is uncomplicated, as harbors go: long and deep, with sides as straight as those of the notch a lumberjack's axe cuts into a log. Except for a tricky patch of rocks and shoals off Low Point, just southeast of the West Chop Light, it is relatively forgiving of inattentive strangers. There are few hidden hazards, and plenty of room to anchor. Its single limitation—a fatal openness to winds that blow from the Northeast—is apparent at a glance, and readily mitigated by careful planning and a close eye on the weather. Edgartown Harbor, the Island's other natural refuge for mariners, is another matter: a puzzle, made of moving water and shifting sand, that periodically rearranges itself, and demands to be solved anew.

The outer section of Edgartown Harbor, viewed from above and reduced to the blue, white, and yellow abstraction of a government-drawn chart, shares Vineyard Haven Harbor's basic shape: a slender cone, with its axis running north-south. To the east lies the impossibly long-and-slender barrier beach that curves around Cape Poge Bay like a beckoning finger. To the west lies an elongated triangle of rock-studded shoal water known as The Flats: wide at its base, off Starbuck's Neck, and narrowing to a tip that extends (slightly) further seaward than Cape Poge itself. Entering the outer harbor, and reaching the sheltered roadstead below the bluffs of North Neck on Chappaquiddick, is a matter of splitting the difference between the two—a process that, as early as the 1830s, was made easier by carefully placed buoys. Penetrating deeper, and reaching the inner section of the harbor with its five great commercial wharves, was another matter entirely.

The channel that connects Edgartown's outer and inner harbors snakes between Starbuck's Neck and Chappaquiddick Point, visibly narrow and hemmed in still further by shoals and shallows. When the tide floods or



This aerial photograph, probably taken in the late 1940s or early 1950s, shows how the channel linking Edgartown's outer (lower right) and inner (lower and center left) follows a complex S-curve as it bends around Chappaquiddick Point (bottom center).

ebbs, water rushes through the channel at speeds of three knots or more—more than enough to push a vessel off its intended course and into trouble. Past Chappaquiddick Point and the wharves of the Edgartown waterfront, the inner harbor opens into a broad, protected anchorage that stretches away to the south—narrowing as the Chappaquiddick shore bulges toward the Vineyard proper, and then expanding into the broad, shallow waters of Katama Bay. As the ocean waves breach, then rebuild, the strip of sand that (sometimes) divides Katama Bay from the Atlantic, the currents in the inner harbor and channel shift with them. Edgartown Harbor is not a place for the inattentive and unwary.

Built at the inflection point between the outer and inner harbors, the Edgartown Harbor Light was intended as a fixed point in a shifting landscape. It is eminently fitting, therefore, that it is the only Island light station never to have been repositioned. The original, wooden lighthouse was erected in 1828, and torn down in 1939, but the new tower—a virtual twin of the ones at East Chop and Nobska Point—was erected on the foundations of the old. Pictures of the old Edgartown Harbor Light differ so radically from our impressions of the (no-longer) “new” one that they seem to depict entirely different settings. It is not, however, the location or (for the last 80 years, anyway) the appearance of the lighthouse that has changed, but the shape of the sand and water around it.

## Lighthouse, Island, and Bridge (1828-1937)

It was a late addition to a great enterprise. A dozen lighthouses—ten new stations, along with replacements for existing lights at Brant Point and Great Point on Nantucket—were erected along the shores of Vineyard Sound and Nantucket Sound between 1798 and 1828. Edgartown Harbor Light was, along with Nobska Point Light on the bluffs east of Woods Hole, the last of them. It was the fourth new light station established on the Vineyard in that thirty-year span, and with it in place the Lighthouse Establishment considered the Island sufficiently equipped with lighted aids to navigation. Twenty-five years would pass before it authorized a new station at the head of Holmes Hole Harbor (Chapter 4), four more before the Holmes Hole station became a full-fledged lighthouse, and a further twenty before it agreed to replace Silas Daggett's lighthouse at East Chop with a modern one of their own (Chapter 5).

Authorization for the new lighthouse came in the form of an act of Congress passed on May 23, 1828, which authorized the Secretary of the Treasury "to provide, by contract, for building a pier and light-house . . . at the entrance to Edgartown Harbor, in the State of Massachusetts." The "pier" was an artificial island—pilings driven into the sand, tied together by cross-beams, and topped with a plank decking—a quarter-mile from shore. The light-house, unlike the three others built on the Island up to that time, was a literal house: a two-story frame building with the lantern—the polygonal iron-and-glass enclosure that housed the light itself—projecting from the crest of the roof. The arrangement, combining the keeper's house and tower into a single unified structure, was in vogue in the 1820s. The seventh Brant Point Light on Nantucket, erected in 1825, had a similar design, as did the original Nobska Point Light, erected the same year as the one at Edgartown. It remained popular until at least the Civil War, and was used for the short-lived Holmes Hole Light (1857) as well as the Bass River Light (1850) in West Dennis and the second Cuttyhunk Light (1860).

Jeremiah Pease of Edgartown was appointed the first keeper of the Edgartown Harbor Light in October 1828, and lit its lamps for the first time on the night of October 15th. The terse entries in his diary—which he had then been keeping for a decade, and would continue for another thirty years, until his death in 1858—reveal that, virtually from the beginning, the poor workmanship that had gone into the building made the job a challenge. On October 27, after less than two weeks of operations, a pane of glass blew out of the lantern and had to be reinstalled. Another blew out on November 22, and a third the following day. Three new panes of glass arrived on December 4, and Pease duly installed them, but there was another blowout on December 5. In the entry for December 9, clearly frus-

trated, he allowed himself a rare moment of editorializing: complaining about the shortcomings of a “brand new lantern” and lamenting the decline in the quality of such work since the days of Capt. Winslow Lewis.<sup>1</sup>

Falling panes of glass were far from Pease’s only difficulty. Lighthouse lamps burned whale oil in those days, and keepers were supplied with “summer oil” for the warm-weather months and “winter oil” for the cold-weather ones. Winter oil was of higher quality, and contained fewer waxy compounds, meaning that it would remain liquid (and thus usable) at lower temperatures. It was more expensive, and therefore carefully rationed by the Lighthouse Board. The annual switch from summer to winter oil, which Pease made (and duly recorded), on November 13, was likely mandated by regulations. The Board was also supposed to regulate the quality of the oil, but on the night of January 3, 1829, Pease recorded that the lamps had “burnt out cold” because what had been sold to the board as high-grade “winter oil” was in fact a lower grade suitable only for summer use. Somewhere in the procurement system, a crooked oil dealer or unscrupulous clerk had pocketed the difference in price.<sup>2</sup>

The Edgartown Harbor Light, on its exposed wooden pier surrounded by water, was also uniquely vulnerable to storm damage. On February 25, 1829, Pease’s diary records that the waves from one such storm had “broken upon the pier” and damaged several of its piles . . . damage that was not made good until the following June.<sup>3</sup> Along with the repairs came long-overdue improvement to the lighthouse: A wooden walkway leading to the shoreline along North Water Street, eliminating the need for Pease to row to his post. The walkway was as exposed and vulnerable as the pier, however, and by mid-November it, too, had to be repaired.<sup>4</sup> The cycle of damage and repair continued for the rest of Pease’s tenure as keeper: broken glass and damaged pilings, painting and adjustment. His diary entry for December 6, 1830, recorded “a very severe gale with driving rain. About 4 o’clock about 40 feet of the pier leading from the lighthouse to the shore carried away.” It concludes laconically: “Did not light the light that night.”<sup>5</sup>

In the years that followed, however, Pease seldom let the weather keep him from his duties. His diary for January 16, 1831, reads:

Very severe gale with driving snow. Highest tide since 1815 and the most severe gale. The snow is about 2 foot deep. Wind changes

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1 “Jeremiah Pease’s Diary, 10 October 1828 to 29 April 1829,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 33, no. 4 (May 1992): 236-240.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 “Jeremiah Pease’s Diary, 1 April 1826 to 31 October 1826,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 32, no. 2 (November 1990), 91-95.

5 “Jeremiah Pease’s Diary 1 October 1830 to 31 October 1831,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 18, no. 2 (November 1976): 40-50.



The first Edgartown Harbor Light, built in 1828, as it appeared in the late nineteenth century. The wooden walkway connecting it to the mainland had already been repaired or rebuilt several times.

at about 10 o'clock at night to north. The boat after damaging herself considerably breaks away from the light house and goes on shore. Then I came off after great labour and lit the light. Then went ashore. Some of the planks near shore are washed off.<sup>6</sup>

A week later, there was a new challenge: "Very cold. The harbour freezes all over at night. I go to the lighthouse on the ice."<sup>7</sup>

Jeremiah Pease watched over the Edgartown Harbor Light for eighteen of its first twenty years in operation: 1828 to 1848. A lifelong supporter of the Democratic Party, he was ousted from the position after the Whig victory in the election of 1840 so that Sylvanus Crocker, a loyal Whig, could be appointed in his place. Crocker took over in March 1841 (Inauguration Day was March 4, until changed under the 20th Amendment in 1933), but held the post only two years. Pease regained the post in 1843, and retained it until 1849, when the Whigs (led by Zachary Taylor) once again retook the White House and Crocker was brought back. At Gay Head, Pease's

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6 Ibid. The 1815 hurricane had been the worst storm in 200 years, surpassed only by the Great Colonial Hurricane of 1635. The channel that now links Lagoon Pond and Vineyard Haven Harbor was one of its legacies—cut through a once-solid barrier beach in a single day.

7 Ibid.

fellow Democrat Samuel Flanders suffered a similar reversal: turned out when the Whigs took office in 1849 and brought back after Franklin Pierce was inaugurated in 1853.

Regardless of which party was in power, the lighthouse itself continued to disintegrate. "It cannot be long," Lt. Edward Carpenter wrote in a report dated November 1, 1838 "before Government will have to reconstruct this breakwater and light-house, as the worms have made great havoc with them, and the sea threatens them, particularly the latter, with total destruction."<sup>8</sup> The wooden pier beneath the lighthouse was replaced by a stone one—a square island of granite blocks, rising from the seabed—in 1840. Two years later, engineer I. W. P. Lewis reported that the wooden walkway, too, was overdue for replacement. The issue, Lewis explained, was not just that the walkway pilings were rotten (though they were), but that "a firm substantial breakwater" was needed between the lighthouse and the shore to keep natural currents from sweeping sand into the harbor channel and rendering it unusable. The pilings of the existing walkway, Lewis explained, stopped some sand but not enough. Action, he concluded, had to be taken within "a few years" if the harbor was to be saved.

Then there was the matter of the lighthouse itself. Sylvanus Crocker, then working as a carpenter, had helped to build the lighthouse in 1828. Taking stock of its condition in 1843, when he was keeper, he was scathing:

The frame of the house was light and weak, and the building always leaky. The lantern stands upon the roof of the house, and is shaken by the force of storms, causing other leaks in the roof. The plastering is off the walls in several places, and one room, together with the upper entry, never was plastered at all by the builder. ...The lantern leaks all about the door and the angles of it. During the gale of October last, it shook so that I had great difficulty in keeping my light burning. There is not rainwater cistern connected with the establishment, all they used for cleaning, &c., being brought from the shore. The causeway has been knocked to pieces five or six times, and has been an expensive concern to keep in sufficient order to cross it with safety. It is my opinion, the whole establishment was very badly built in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

Small wonder, then, that Jeremiah Pease, for all of his eighteen years as keeper, had declined to actually live in the lighthouse, preferring his own (doubtless better-built) home ashore.

Lewis got his "firm and substantial breakwater" in 1847, at a cost of \$5,000, and a further \$4,500 was appropriated in 1850 to extend it. The stonework (the outboard end of which had settled as the sands beneath it

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8 Reprinted in *Documents Relating to Lighthouses, 1789-1871* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1871), 190.

9 Lighthouse Friends

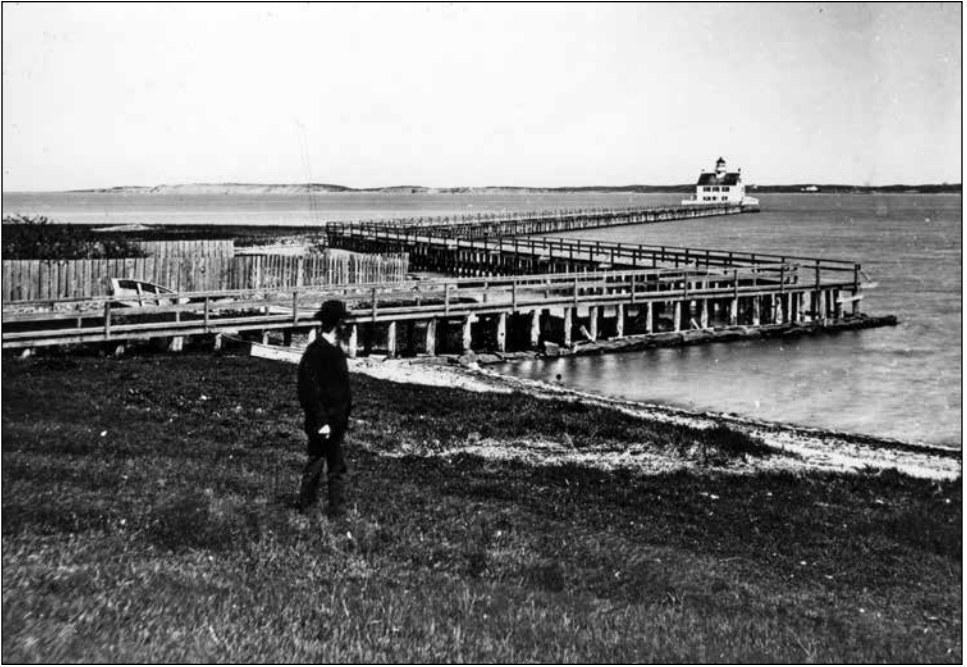
shifted) was raised by a foot in 1869, and the bridge and its enclosing fence underwent substantial repairs in 1869, 1873, 1892, and 1897. A similar battle against entropy and decay was carried out on the lighthouse itself as the second half of the century wound on. There were major improvements to the lantern, roof, and walls in 1868, “extensive repairs” made in 1873, a significant “renewal” in 1885, and a complete replacement of the first floor in 1900. The rainwater cisterns that had been the station’s only source of fresh water were replaced by a “pipe well” in 1895, and the old wooden oil shed replaced by an iron one—fireproof, and so better suited for storing the volatile kerosene that was then being used in the lamps—in 1896.

The citizens of Edgartown likely gave little attention, and less thought, to this decades-long litany of repairs and upgrades (though the installation of a fourth-order Fresnel lens in 1856 may have been a source of civic pride). They saw the Edgartown Harbor Light not as a working building but as a landmark whose whitewashed walls and black iron lantern lent a note of grace and elegance to a waterfront jammed with fishing shacks, warehouses, workshops, and piles of maritime hardware. The aesthetic value of the lighthouse only increased as, when the whaling industry began its long downward spiral in the 1870s and 1880s, the waterfront grew moribund, and the once-vibrant commercial buildings grew derelict. Perched on its stone island offshore, the lighthouse was a visual echo of the whitewashed captain’s houses onshore. The wooden bridge, like the “widow’s walks” atop the houses, became the subject of romantic legends about Edgartown seafarers and the women—mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and wives—they left behind when they set sail. It was, the legends claim, known as “the Bridge of Sighs,” because women would go there to wave to departing ships—a last farewell to loved ones who might be gone for years, or never come home at all.<sup>10</sup>

The phrase “Bridge of Sighs,” used in reference to Edgartown rather than Venice, first appeared in print after the whaling era was over. Like the image of a spyglass-wielding whaling wife atop her widow’s walk, scanning the horizon for her husband’s ship, it may owe more to romance than reality . . . or it may capture memories of a practice once too common to warrant (or need) a formal description. What *is* clear, from nineteenth century documents like the 1862 journal of Mary Marchant, is that the lighthouse bridge was a popular destination for evening strolls, particularly on warm summer nights. It requires no great stretch of the imagination to believe that many of those strollers were young couples who, observing the elaborate rituals of nineteenth-century courtship, found the bridge a respectably public place to enjoy precious time alone together . . . or that they, too, exchanged sighs in the moonlight.

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10 See, for example, Gale Huntington, *An Introduction to Martha’s Vineyard* (Edgartown: Dukes County Historical Society, 1969), 56.



The original Edgartown Harbor Light was built on a wooden (later stone) pier a quarter mile from shore. The current light stands in exactly the same position, but the wooden footbridge was replaced by a straight stone jetty, now nearly buried by sand.

### Saving the Harbor Light (1938-1939)

It was the summer of 1938. The legendary horse Seabiscuit was being trained for a fall showdown with War Admiral, billed as “The Race of the Century.” Hitler was consolidating his hold over Austria and eyeing the German-speaking borderlands of Czechoslovakia. The liner *Queen Mary* had logged the fastest two-way crossing of the North Atlantic in history, reclaiming the notional “Blue Riband” from the *Normandie*, which had taken it from her the summer before. The newly founded March of Dimes was collecting for polio relief, Orson Welles was contemplating an adaptation of *War of the Worlds* for his *Mercury Theater on the Air* radio program, and the Edgartown Harbor Light—a few months past its 110th birthday—was dying.

A century and a decade is no extraordinary age for a well-built, well-maintained wooden structure to achieve. The Thomas Cooke House, fifteen minutes’ brisk walk from the Harbor Light, was two years shy of 200 years old that summer, and the Norton-Cleveland house across the street was past 250. Other Island dwellings—including the Vincent House on the plains north of Edgartown Great Pond, the Great House at the tip of West Chop, and the Hancock-Mitchell-Mayhew House at Quansoo—

were older still.<sup>11</sup> Those houses, however, had been built with care and craft, and kept by owners who had every motivation to keep them in good repair. The Edgartown Harbor Light had, as Sylvanus Crocker had noted in 1843, not been built well to begin with, and the succession of keepers who had lived with its deficiencies—though free, and indeed expected, to handle maintenance and minor repairs themselves—had no direct control over major ones. Every significant improvement to the structure, and every attempt to make good what had been done badly at the outset, had to be coaxed out of the Lighthouse Establishment, and funded by a parsimonious Congress.

The lighthouse was also uniquely vulnerable to the elements. Perched on its square granite island a quarter-mile from land, it was exposed from every direction to the wind, waves, and salt spray of every storm. No nearby bluff or rise, no line of trees, and no adjacent structure shielded it. Every poorly made joint, improperly fitted window, and inadequately caulked seam was (and had been for more than a century) a vector through which water could penetrate the outer shell of the lighthouse and settle into the fabric of its walls and floors. Once there, it rotted wood, corroded metal, and—expanding as it froze in the winter—loosened joints, admitting still more water. Vermin, too, exploited the openings and penetrated the walls, feasting on the keeper's supplies and further damaging the lighthouse itself.

Oversight of America's lighthouses was still, nominally, in the hands of the Lighthouse Service in the summer of 1938 (they would be transferred to the Coast Guard the following year), and it was the Lighthouse Service that, passed judgement on the fate of the Edgartown Harbor Light. Their decision—which reached the Island on July 13, 1938—was rooted in practicality and efficiency, and informed by the rapid advance of technology. The existing lighthouse, the Coast Guard announced, would be torn down, the Fresnel lens (now amplifying a lamp long since converted from whale oil to lard oil to kerosene) retired, and the keeper's position abolished. The entrance to Edgartown Harbor would henceforth be marked by an automated electric beacon placed atop a steel-skeleton tower.

The Lighthouse Service's specifications for the job were, as always, meticulously detailed. All traces of the existing structure and outbuildings—oil house, storage shed, fog signal, and the rest—would be removed, leaving only the stone pier beneath. The well pipe that had supplied the lighthouse with water would be torn up and an electrical cable laid to the shore, two feet below the seabed, and tied into the existing town power grid. The

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11 All five still exist. The Cooke House (now owned by the Martha's Vineyard Museum) and the Vincent House (moved to downtown Edgartown in 1978 and now owned by the Vineyard Trust) are operated as historic sites and open to visitors each summer.

top surface of the pier would be finished with concrete, into which the footings for the new tower would be set. The tower itself would be a slender pyramid of galvanized steel strips, eight feet square at the base and forty feet high, shipped to the Island in sections and bolted together on the site. The footbridge would be left in place, but—because there would be no need for routine access to the light—no money would be allocated for maintenance or repairs. Unless kept up by the town or private interests, it would rot in place and soon be demolished. The decision was rational, unsentimental, and—at a time when the chill of the Great Depression still lingered in the bones of the US economy—undeniably cost-effective.

The people of Edgartown hated it.

The *Vineyard Gazette*'s announcement of the plan, published only two days after the receipt of the news, carried the headline "Town Protests the Loss of Harbor Light" followed by the subhead "Storm of Disapproval Greets News Government Plans to Replace Edgartown Landmark."<sup>12</sup> Three paragraphs in, the unnamed author noted that an "urgent protest" had been planned in Edgartown, spurred by the government's announcement that the contract for the demolition and reconstruction would be let on July 22. The rest of the substantial article focused on the nature of the protest, recounting the protestors' objections in full, and saying nothing about the government's justifications for the change.



The Edgartown Harbor Light, more than a century old when this photo was taken in early September 1938, looks solid and well-kept, but it suffered from leaks, rot, and vermin. The decision to demolish and replace it had already been made.

12 "Town Protests the Loss of Harbor Light," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 15, 1938, pp. 1, 6. Martha's Vineyard Museum, Vertical Files Collection. All quotations in this paragraph and the two that follow are taken from this article.

The protestors quoted in the article included many of the most prominent names associated with the Edgartown waterfront: Captain Claude Wagner of the schooner *Liberty*, inshore catboat fishermen Tom and Oscar Pease, boatbuilder Manuel Swartz, Chappaquiddick ferry operator Midge Betencourt, and former Edgartown Yacht Club commodore Alexander Orr. Vernon Foster, identified as “a member of the summer colony prominent in boating and yachting circles,” declared that: “The yachtsmen need the lighthouse. Yachting is certainly an industry, and an important one, and nothing should be done which will tend to make yachting here less safe.” Foster also observed that “the present light is a part of Edgartown. The historic value is important.” Harbor View Hotel manager Andrew C. Littlefield emphasized the aesthetics of the proposed change, lamenting that it would “destroy one of the picturesque features of the harbor, and . . . prove a great detriment to the view all along the waterfront.”

The majority of the quoted protestors, however, objected to the proposed changes not on grounds of aesthetics or historic preservation, but of safety. The new lighthouse, slated to be eight feet shorter than the old, was deemed inadequate as an aid to navigation by local mariners. The effect, Captain Antone Silva argued, “will be to lessen a man’s chances to get a bearing when he comes in. It means he must be that much closer in order to get a bearing.”<sup>13</sup> The light tower, Silva concluded, “should be higher rather than lower” Recreational boater Charles Welch of Chilmark echoed the sentiment, declaring that Edgartown “might as well have no light at all, as have one shorter than the present one.” Others interviewed for the story objected to the planned removal of the fog bell, telling stories of fogbound vessels—ranging from 18-foot day-sailers to the 92-foot schooner yacht *Mañana*—that were guided home by it. The quote from Dr. David Whitmarsh of Starbuck’s Neck that ended the story clearly summed up the feelings of many Edgartonians: “I should miss the light very much, and I should regret any attempt to alter or remove it.”

A three-member delegation from Edgartown—Captain Silva, Commodore Walter Barnum of the Edgartown Yacht Club, and state representative Joseph A. Sylvia—flew to Boston on July 16 to register those concerns. Meeting with Captain George E. Eaton, superintendent of the Second Lighthouse District, they returned with assurances that, the new beacon would be better than the old: four feet higher and three or four times brighter. The government, they were assured, had no intention of allowing the footbridge to go to ruin, and although the existing fog bell would be removed, it would be

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13 Silva was correct, but the difference would have been negligible. A six-foot sailor standing three feet above the water’s surface would have seen the 48-foot lighthouse at 11.76 nautical miles, and the 40-foot tower at 10.72 nautical miles. A vessel sailing due south from Cape Cod toward Edgartown would thus have seen either light shortly after leaving port.

replaced by a new, electric one. There was even the possibility, Eaton stated, of placing the beacon on a more aesthetically attractive tower if the town was willing to pay the \$1,500 difference in cost, or of placing it atop the existing structure, if the town would agree to maintain it. Reporting these developments, the *Gazette* noted that Representative Charles L. Gifford, the Island's voice in Congress, had called on the Lighthouse Service to delay action "until all interests had a chance to be heard." Gifford and the state's two senators had, the *Gazette* reported, been bombarded by communications urging them to action, including a telegram sent by Edgartown summer resident Emily Post to Senator David Ignatius Walsh.<sup>14</sup>

On July 22, originally set as the deadline for bids to demolish the old lighthouse, the *Gazette* reported that the process had been suspended while the government reviewed its options, and that the Martha's Vineyard Garden Club and the Dukes County Historical Society had come out in favor of preserving and restoring the historic lighthouse. The story ended by expressing the hope that "a plan can be worked out to utilize the present structure by adapting it to the new conditions without requiring local contributions" for its upkeep—something the government had insisted on.<sup>15</sup> Four days later, on July 26, the *Gazette* reported that Captain Eaton of the Lighthouse Service had met with Winthrop B. Norton, chair of the Edgartown Board of Selectmen, in New Bedford and presented the town with a clear and stark choice. "The Edgartown Harbor Light will be left exactly as it is, with keeper and all, if the interests here will go on record in favor of that choice," the lead sentence of the front-page *Gazette* story declared. Otherwise, the existing lighthouse would be demolished, and replaced with the steel tower and higher, brighter light originally proposed. On page 3, adjacent to the continuation of the story, that day's *Gazette* carried a William Abbé linoleum-block print of the steel skeleton tower marking the entrance to Oak Bluffs harbor, as if to remind readers of the stakes.

Petitions on which residents of Edgartown were invited to register their preference for one option or the other were made available at the yacht club and selectmen's office during the last week in July. The result—301 to 0 in favor of keeping the existing structure—delivered, resoundingly, the expression of public sentiment that Eaton had said was necessary.<sup>16</sup> "The

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14 "Plan More Powerful Light, Higher Tower," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 19, 1938, p. 1, 3. Gifford, of Cotuit, represented the Congressional district that included the Cape and Islands (variously the 16th, 15th, and 9th) from 1922-1947. Walsh, a former governor of Massachusetts, served as senator from 1919-1925, and 1926-1947.

15 "Continue Efforts to Save Harbor Light," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 22, 1938, p. 1.

16 "Three Days Left to Sign Lighthouse Petition," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 29, 1938, p. 1, 3; "Vote Stands 301-0 in Favor of Keeping Current Harbor Light," *Vineyard Gazette*, August 2, 1938.

interests” had made themselves heard. Edgartown celebrated, but not for long. H. D. King, the Commissioner of the Lighthouse Service quickly weighed in, overruling Eaton’s offer as too expensive, and rejecting any possibility of saving the original lighthouse or the bridge. Henry Beetle Hough printed the text of the letter in its entirety in the *Gazette*, giving Edgartonians—perhaps for the first time—a sense of just how dire the building’s condition really was.<sup>17</sup> “It appears,” Hough wrote in a separate editorial, “that there has never been any serious consideration of the desire to preserve the present Light, in spite of appearances. Perhaps there is still time to obtain this consideration . . . but it will take quick action, and all messages will have to go to Washington by wire.”<sup>18</sup>

The *Gazette* itself sent such a telegram, as did Winthrop B. Norton on behalf of the board of selectmen, but King’s decision stood. Apparently in response, however, he dispatched the Lighthouse Service’s chief engineer, Ralph R. Tinkham, to assess the situation. Tinkham arrived on August 12, a Friday, and at a Monday meeting involving Tinkham, Eaton, and Edgartown representatives, a third way forward emerged. The old lighthouse would be demolished, but it would be replaced not by a utilitarian tower of galvanized steel but by a conical iron lighthouse similar to the ones erected at East Chop and Nobska Point sixty years before. The proposed “new” lighthouse was of the same vintage; erected on Crane’s Beach at Ipswich, MA in 1881, it had recently been declared superfluous by the economy-minded Lighthouse Service. Made of cast-iron sections bolted together, it could be taken apart and loaded onto a barge for shipment to, and reassembly at, the existing stone pier in Edgartown.<sup>19</sup> A watercolor sketch of the proposed new light arrived in Edgartown on Friday, August 19, and appeared in the *Gazette* on August 23. It showed an East-Chop-style tower—bright white with a black lantern—perched on the familiar stone island, flanked by a sailing yacht and a modern cabin cruiser.<sup>20</sup> The familiar wooden bridge and the stone breakwater beneath were conspicuously absent from the sketch: a subtle reminder from the Lighthouse Service, perhaps, that their days were numbered.

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17 “Revoke Promise to Save Harbor Light,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 9, 1938, p. 1, 7.

18 “Strange Contradictions,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 9, 1938, editorial page. Hough, who attended many of the locally held meetings at which the fate of the lighthouse was discussed, is the presumptive author of all the *Gazette* articles quoted here.

19 “Engineer Coming,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 12, 1938, p. 6; “Compromise Verdict on Lighthouse,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 16, 1938, p. 1, 4.

20 “Sketch of Proposed New Light Received,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 19, 1938; “Official Sketch of Proposed Edgartown Harbor Lighthouse,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 23, 1938, p. 6.

Plans to replace the Edgartown Harbor Light were in place, approved by all concerned, before Labor Day. Only the details—which builder would get the contract, when the work would begin—remained to be filled in, and they were settled by Halloween.<sup>21</sup> The Hurricane of 1938, widely but erroneously credited with destroying the old lighthouse or damaging it so badly that the Lighthouse Service ordered its demolition, did neither. Storm waves undermined part of the stone pier, shifting granite blocks out of position and causing one corner of the lighthouse to sag toward the sea, and drifting boats damaged the footbridge, but the lighthouse remained intact and habitable.<sup>22</sup> Keeper Fred Vidler and his wife continued to live there until their transfer to Nauset Light came through on November 14, and the building was still standing, battered but unbowed, when demolition work began on December 12.<sup>23</sup>

The lighted buoy put in place to temporarily mark the harbor entrance remained there through the winter of 1938-39, and into the spring. Disassembled at Ipswich in the fall, the replacement tower was refurbished at a Lighthouse Service depot in Chelsea over the winter. Turner & Breivogel, a Falmouth-based construction company, began working on repairs to the hurricane-damaged stone pier in mid-March, and the refurbished but still disassembled tower arrived a month later. Johan Axel Hoglund, an Edgartown house painter, gave the tower its promised coat of white paint on May 25, and by Memorial Day Weekend—just in time for the start of the summer yachting season—Edgartown Harbor once again had a functioning lighthouse.<sup>24</sup>

## The Iron Tower and the Birth of a Beach

When it stood on the beach at Ipswich, the new Edgartown Harbor Light had—like those at East Chop and Nobska Point—been given an inner lining of brick, designed to add insulation and stiffness. No new brick lining was installed when the tower was reassembled at Edgartown, and—since the electrification and automation of the light eliminated the need for more than occasional access to the lantern room—a straight metal ladder took the place of a traditional spiral staircase. The

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21 “Bids Are Submitted for Demolishing Harbor Light,” *Vineyard Gazette*, October 14, 1938, p. 1; “Contract Is Awarded to Raze Lighthouse,” *Vineyard Gazette*, October 28, 1938, p. 1.

22 The *Gazette*’s account of the storm damage to the lighthouse and pier, part of a much longer story on the hurricane’s impact, appeared in p. 5 of the September 23, 1938 edition, published two days after the storm.

23 “Knell is Sounded,” *Vineyard Gazette*, November 18, 1938, p. 1; “Lighthouse Demolition Will Begin Monday,” *Vineyard Gazette*, December 9, 1938, p. 1.

24 “Repair Hurricane Damage to Foundation of Light,” *Vineyard Gazette*, March 17, 1939, p. 3; “New Harbor Light Here, but Still in Pieces,” *Vineyard Gazette*, April 14, 1939, p. 3; “Harbor Light Receives Coat of White Paint,” *Vineyard Gazette*, May 26, 1939, p. 3.



Damage done to the lighthouse's foundation by the 1938 Hurricane was relatively minor, but the repairs it required delayed replacement of the lighthouse by several months.

outside of the new tower was sleek and elegant, a “source of considerable pride and satisfaction for those who fought to the last for the preservation of the former lighthouse,” but the interior was as grimly functional as the galvanized-steel tower they had worked so hard to avoid.<sup>25</sup>

The new tower stood on the same stone pier as the old, and the quarter-mile between it and the shore was traversed by the same wooden footbridge. A pair of side-by-side photographs printed in the summer-opening “Directory Edition” of the *Gazette* on June 7, 1939, highlighted the fact that the tower, but *only* the tower, had changed. Over the ensuing decades, however, the interplay of natural processes and human activity altered—slowly and steadily, but radically—the relationship between sea, land, and lighthouse. Naturally occurring “longshore” currents running parallel to the beach had always carried sand along the shoreline and into the harbor. The stone jetty erected under the footbridge in 1847, and raised in 1869, was designed to block such transport and slow the shoaling of the harbor that resulted. A subsequent dredging of the harbor by the Army Corps of Engineers was designed to undo the results.

Broadened and extended sometime after the installation of the new lighthouse, perhaps to better preserve the effects of the dredging, the jetty interrupted the longshore currents more effectively. Larger quantities of sand began to accumulate on the north side of the jetty, and on the northern and western edges of the stone pier. The side-by-side photos of the old

25 “Harbor Light Receives Coat of White Paint,” p. 3.

and new towers from June 1939 show the latter completely surrounded by water, but another photo, taken from roughly the same position a little more than a decade later, shows the jetty and the shoreward side of the stone pier engulfed by dry sand. Aerial photographs, postcards and maps from the 1950s and 1960s document the growth of what became known as Lighthouse Beach: a broad, flat expanse of sand that completely engulfed the jetty and turned the lighthouse's stone base into an "island" entirely surrounded by sand. Readily accessible from the Harbor View and the other hotels lining North and South Water Street, this accidental stretch of waterfront became, by the 1970s, a popular tourist destination.

Even as the beach around it was growing, however, the lighthouse itself was slowly deteriorating. The cast iron tower was a more durable, lower-maintenance design than the wood-frame house it replaced, but it faced the same relentless battering from wind, water, salt, and blown sand. Over time, blotches of rust began to appear through the white paint on the walls, and broken windows in the tower—casualties of human vandalism or avian misadventure—were replaced by painted plywood rather than glass. Persistent funding shortages during the 1970s and early 1980s made it difficult for the US Coast Guard (which had taken over responsibility for the nation's lighthouses when the Lighthouse Service was merged with it in 1939) to keep up with the maintenance. In 1984, the Edgartown Harbor Light was placed on a list of lighthouses slated for destruction and (if still necessary as an aid to navigation) replacement by a low-maintenance metal spindle topped by a strobe light.

Over the next year, the newly-founded Vineyard Environmental Research Institute (VERI) lobbied the Coast Guard to preserve the three lighthouses and transfer responsibility for their maintenance and upkeep to VERI. With the assistance of Representative Gerry Studds and Senator Ted Kennedy, the campaign was successful, and VERI was granted a 35-year license for stewardship of all three lighthouses in 1985. Over the next three years, VERI raised funds for, and oversaw, a long-overdue refurbishment of the lighthouse, and applied (successfully) for its addition to the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. When the refurbishment was completed in 1988, VERI reopened the light to limited public access for the first time in fifty years, staffing it with volunteers on summer weekends and beginning the tradition of decorating it for Christmas. The Coast Guard, which retained responsibility for maintaining and upgrading the lamp and optics, replaced the 1856 fourth-order Fresnel lens with a modern plastic one in 1990, and installed solar panels to be its primary source of electrical power.<sup>26</sup>

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26 Jeremy D'Entremont, "History of Edgartown Lighthouse, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts," *New England Lighthouses: A Virtual Guide*. <http://www.newenglandlighthouses.net/edgartown-light-history.html>



Completely surrounded by water when the current tower was erected on it in the spring of 1939, the stone pier on which the lighthouse stands was half-embedded in a rapidly accumulating beach when this aerial photo was taken in the 1950s. By the 1970s it was completely surrounded by sand, and water touched the stone base only during severe storms, such as Hurricane Bob in 1991.

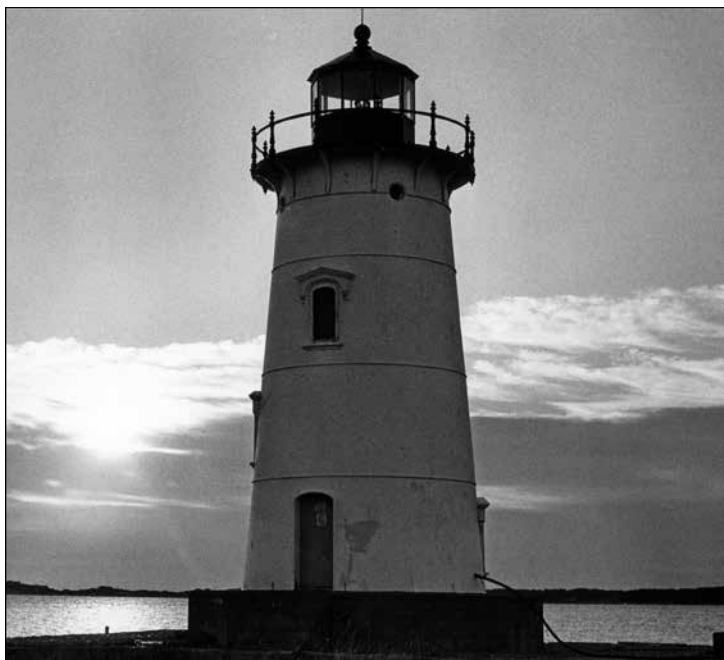
Stewardship of the Edgartown Harbor Light was transferred from VERI to the Dukes County Historical Society (later the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society and now the Martha's Vineyard Museum) in 1994. It has remained with the Museum ever since, continuing uninterrupted when the Coast Guard declared the lighthouse itself surplus property in 2011 and, in 2014, sold it to the Town of Edgartown for the symbolic sum of one dollar. The "real lighthouse" that Edgartonians had fought so hard for 75 years earlier thus became, for the first time, theirs in fact as well as in spirit.<sup>27</sup>

During its first decade of stewardship the Historical Society (as it was at the time) raised funds for, and oversaw completion of, two major projects that transformed the lighthouse's relationship to Vineyard residents and visitors. One, completed in 2007, was the fabrication and installation of a new spiral staircase inside the tower, which enabled the lantern and balcony to be opened to visitors.<sup>28</sup> The other was the transformation of the plaza

27 Sara Brown, "Edgartown Takes Ownership of Its Lighthouse," *Vineyard Gazette*, January 10, 2014.

28 D'Entremont, "History of Edgartown Lighthouse."

around the concrete base of the lighthouse into a children's memorial. The memorial was proposed by longtime Edgartown resident Rick Harrington, whose 16-year-old son Ricky had been killed in a car crash in Boston in 1995, and dedicated in 2001. It consists of four narrow granite slabs set into the surface of the plaza—aligned with the points of the compass and suggestive of the lighthouse's beam shining out in all directions—and rectangular granite cobblestones whose texture mimics the surface of the sea in fair weather. Names carved into the cobblestones memorialize individual children of all ages, and many places, who were lost before their time.<sup>29</sup> The monument—and now, by extension, the lighthouse—stands for them all.



Taken in the 1980s, this deliberately artistic photo of the “new” Edgartown Harbor Light shows off the elegant lines of the tower, but also rust-mottled paint and broken windows blanked off with painted plywood: legacies of two decades of budget cuts and reduced funding for maintenance.

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29 Pat Waring, “Tenth Anniversary for Edgartown Lighthouse Children’s Memorial,” *Martha’s Vineyard Times*, September 7, 2011 (Martha’s Vineyard Museum Vertical Files Collection, VREF 1114.003).

# Cape Poge Light (1801)

LIGHTHOUSES ARE placed for the benefit of those who navigate by them, not for the convenience of those who tend them. They are erected, as a result, in some of the most remote and inhospitable places imaginable: on windswept cliffs like the Highland Light in Truro, wave-swept rocks like Minot's Ledge Light in Boston, and the tips of fragile barrier beaches like Great Point Light on Nantucket. The isolation experienced by the keepers of remote light stations is profound, and—though played for laughs in “The Keeper of the Eddystone Light,” a foc’sle song about the title character’s one-night stand with a mermaid<sup>1</sup>—it could take a severe toll. Sailors on long ocean passages were more geographically isolated, but they could rely on their shipmates for aid and companionship.<sup>2</sup> Lighthouse keepers assigned to remote stations had, at best, a single assistant and, depending on individual circumstances, their wives and children. Many, however, spent their days completely alone.

Five of the six lighthouses of Martha's Vineyard ranged from moderately remote to downright cosmopolitan. West Chop and East Chop Light were a mile or two by road from the nearest town, while Edgartown Harbor Light and (during its brief existence) Holmes Hole Light were within easy walking distance. Gay Head Light, though separated from Chilmark by six miles of bad road, had neighbors within walking distance. None

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1 Unlike chanteys, which were sung to accompany, and establish a rhythm for, heavy shipboard work like raising anchors or sails, foc’sle songs were played and sung for entertainment by sailors who were at leisure or engaged in lighter work. Commercially recorded versions of “Keeper of the Eddystone Light” typically use the line “he married a mermaid one fine night,” but “slept with a mermaid”—common in live performances—is likely closer to the original. On the Vineyard, “Gay Head Light” is traditionally substituted for “Eddystone Light.”

2 Inshore fishermen in small boats might work alone, but solo blue-water passages under sail were the province of adventurers like Joshua Slocum, not working sailors.

was as isolated as Dumpling Rock or Tarpaulin Cove, let alone Monomoy or Great Point . . . none, that is, but Cape Poge.

The southern half of Chappaquiddick, the sometime-island whose official status varies with the state of the barrier beach that divides Katama Bay from the Atlantic Ocean, is mostly land: rolling meadows and scrub woodlands edged with salt ponds. The northern half is mostly water: a broad shallow bay enclosed by the jutting thumb of North Neck and the long, crooked finger of Cape Poge.<sup>3</sup> The Cape Poge Light is located—to lean on the “hand” analogy a moment longer—at one of the knuckles in that finger: the place where, after running due north for over four miles, the barrier beach that forms the outer margin of Chappaquiddick bends westward. Sited atop a sandy bluff left behind by the retreating glaciers and clawed at ever since by wind and waves, Cape Poge Light is the Vineyard’s loneliest—and its most vulnerable.

### The First Two Towers (1801-1850)

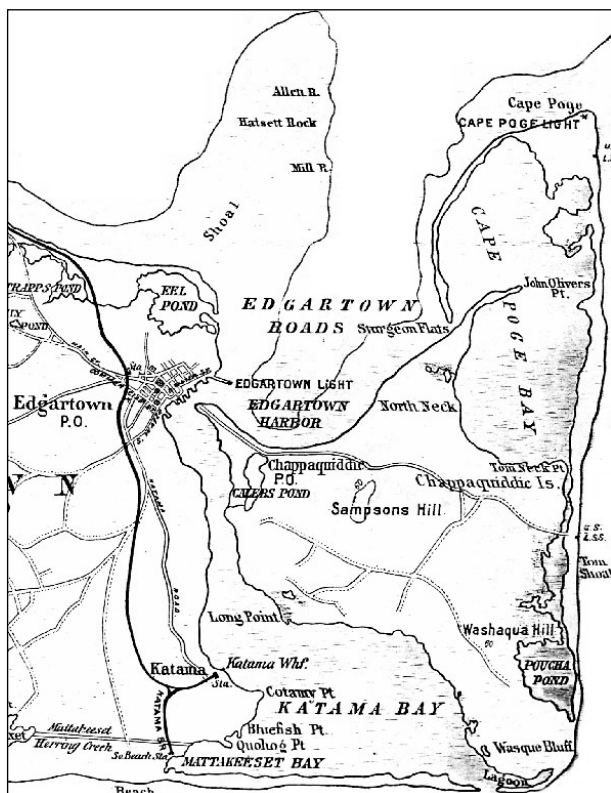
Congress authorized construction of a lighthouse at Cape Poge in 1801, and allocated \$2000 for the project. Cape Poge Light was designed to mark the gateway to Nantucket Sound in much the same way that Gay Head Light, approved two years earlier, marked the gateway to Vineyard Sound. The passage between Cape Poge and Cape Cod was significantly wider than that between Gay Head and Cuttyhunk, but the need for a lighthouse at Cape Poge was no less critical. Directly north of Cape Poge lay relatively deep water; directly south of it lay a four-mile stretch of unbroken, low-lying barrier beach. For a ship bound westward up Nantucket Sound, a tiny discrepancy between the course plotted on the chart and the course actually steered by the helmsman could make the difference between a routine passage and disaster. Especially on cloudy or moonless nights, the sound of breakers ahead could be the first indication that something had gone terribly wrong. The lighthouse at Cape Poge, visible for 15 miles, provided a critical reference point for approaching ships. Spotted off the port bow, it reassured them that they were in safe waters. Spotted dead ahead or, worse, off the starboard bow, it allowed them to make course corrections *before* doing it became a matter of life and death.<sup>4</sup>

The Cape Poge Light also provided westbound vessels headed for Edgartown—whether because it was their final destination or because the

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3 The name of the shallow bay and the curving barrier beach enclosing it can be spelled either “Cape Poge” or “Cape Pogue.” The Martha’s Vineyard Museum follows the US Geological Survey in using the former.

4 Like the theatrical terms “stage left” and “stage right,” the nautical terms “port” and “starboard” are designed to eliminate ambiguity by defining “left” and “right” with respect to an agreed-upon reference point. “Stage left” and “stage right” are the left and right of a person on stage, facing into the audience. “Port” and “starboard” are the left and right of a person on the deck of a vessel, facing the bow.



The relationship between Cape Poge, Edgartown Harbor, and Nantucket Sound, shown in a copy of an 1830 map drawn by Henry Crapo.

captain intended to make it his first American port-of-call, and clear customs there—that it would soon be time to put their helm over, and steer for the head of the harbor. For eastbound vessels, it was a reminder that Muskeget Channel—the waterway dividing Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket—lay just beyond. A quick route to the open ocean for vessels headed south, the channel was also a navigational challenge, filled with strong currents and shifting shoals. Approaching vessels, whether intending to use it or avoid it, benefitted from the advance warning.

The government’s specification for the lighthouse and keeper’s house, published in the *Boston Palladium* on August 1, 1801, were extensive and meticulously detailed. Running for ten paragraphs and thousands of words, they specified everything from the shape and dimensions of the tower to the size and type of lumber used in the floors of the keeper’s house and the number and nature of the brackets that would hold the lantern in the tower. No pictures survive of the first Cape Poge Light, but the specifications suggest that it would have looked similar to numerous other American lighthouses of the era: an octagonal-sectioned pyramid constructed of oak and pine, shingled and painted white, set on a stone foundation and topped by an iron-and-glass lantern with a domed lead roof. Observers who had studied the 1799 Gay Head Light at close range would likely have found little to surprise them. The most visible difference between the two would have been their relative size: The original Gay Head Light was 47 feet from its base to the top of its lantern, but the original Cape Poge Light was only 42 feet.<sup>5</sup>

5 “Plan of a Light-House to be Erected at Cape-Poge,” *New England Palladium*, August 1, 1801. Transcript in MVM Vertical File Collection, VREF 1115.001 (“Cape Poge Light”).

Matthew Mayhew of Edgartown took charge of the light on the first night its whale-oil lamps were lit. He watched over it for the next 33 years, a record unsurpassed by any of his successors and among the longest terms served by any Vineyard lighthouse keeper. On his watch, during the War of 1812, the lamps and reflectors were disassembled and hidden, lest marauding British troops try to destroy them or carry them away. On his watch, in 1825, the tower was moved, for the first time, away from the crumbling edge of the cliff. On his watch came the first of many sleepless nights struggling to keep the lamps lit, and the first of many shipwrecks whose half-drowned survivors sought refuge in his house. There would be more of both—more wars, and more moves as well—for the thirteen keepers who followed him.<sup>6</sup>

The end of Mayhew's term as keeper was also the end of his life. He died at 6 AM on December 20, 1834, and his corpse was brought back from Cape Poge to Edgartown that afternoon. Neither of Mayhew's adult sons coveted the position—though by the conventions of the time it was theirs for the asking—and Captain Lot Norton of Edgartown quickly put himself forward as Mayhew's successor. His application, submitted to the Collector of Customs in Edgartown and forwarded to Washington, bore the endorsements of thirteen prominent Edgartonians, including Sheriff Isaiah D. Pease, Dr. Daniel Fisher, schoolmaster Leavitt Thaxter, and all three selectmen. Norton was formally appointed on December 31, and word of his new job reached Edgartown on January 9. Getting to the lighthouse was another matter; delayed by ice, he did not reach the station until January 12.<sup>7</sup>

Once on site, he inherited one of Mayhew's principal challenges: convincing his superiors that the lighthouse was in imminent danger of falling into the sea. The government had purchased four acres of land for the tower and keeper's house in 1801, but a quarter-century later, only two acres remained. The rest had simply disappeared as storm waves relentlessly undermined the bluffs, and the edge of the cliff crumbled onto the beach below. On one particularly stormy night, the cliff edge retreated fourteen feet. The keeper's house was moved further inland, and in 1836—after the boundary wall enclosing it began to disappear over the edge of the cliff—plans were made to move the tower as well. Action took longer than intent (a pattern often repeated in the decades to come), but in 1838 the tower was shifted inland, safe for the moment. I. W. P. Lewis, who inspected the site in 1842, noted that “a breakwater, (so called), consisting of pilings, planks, and ballast, was constructed, to protect the point from further decay; but the whole was demolished the following winter, and its remains (the ballast) are now visible

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6 Arthur R. Railton, “Cape Poge Light: Remote and Lonely, Part One,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 25, no. 2 (November 1983): 54-80, on pp. 67-69.

7 Railton, “Cape Poge Light, Part One,” 79.



The original Cape Poge Light, as imagined by artist Charles Hubbard in the 1840s. Like John Warner Barber's rendering of the Gay Head Light from the same era, makes the tower larger, and the scenery more dramatic, than it was in real life, playing to the era's fascination with images of human-made works dwarfed by the power of wild nature.

under water about seventy-five feet outside of the present beach.”<sup>8</sup>

Moving the tower did little, however, to improve its condition. After nearly forty years of constant exposure to the elements, it was drafty, leaky, and decrepit. Lewis, in his 1842 report, called it “an octagonal frame building, rotten from base to roof” that “requires to be rebuilt at once.”<sup>9</sup> The Lighthouse Establishment’s response to “at once” was, once again, leisurely. Funds for a replacement were eventually appropriated, however, and in 1844 a new octagonal tower—thirty, rather than thirty-five, feet tall this time—was erected in place of the original, complete with a new lantern and a covered wooden walkway to connect it to the keeper’s house. The new tower was also fitted with new lamps and reflectors—another example of Winslow Lewis’s willingness to use his position in the Lighthouse Establishment to promote the government purchases of equipment he manufactured, sold, and made a tidy profit on.<sup>10</sup> Fresnel lenses, superior

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8 Quoted in Jeremy D’Entremont, “History of Cape Poge Light,” *New England Lighthouses: A Virtual Guide*, <http://www.newenglandlighthouses.net/cape-poge-light-history.html>

9 Lewis in D’Entremont, “History of Cape Poge Light.”

10 Winslow Lewis’s career, and his collision with his reform-minded nephew I. W. P. Lewis, is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

in every respect, were then in wide use in Europe, but—to the growing dismay of American sailors—the Lighthouse Establishment’s misplaced frugality and blithe indifference to Lewis’s conflict of interest kept them out of American lighthouses for another decade.

### Improvements (1850-1900)

When it *did* come, change came quickly. A first-order Fresnel lens was installed in the new brick tower at Gay Head in 1856, and by the end of 1857, each of the other four lighthouses then operating on the Island (West Chop, Holmes Hole, Edgartown Harbor, and Cape Poge) had been equipped with a smaller, fourth-order Fresnel. Along with its new lens, the Cape Poge Light got a new lantern, and six years later there were repairs to the keeper’s house: rebuilt chimneys, new shutters, fresh paint, and more. The improvements were doubtless welcome, but they did not change the fundamental reality of the keeper’s life. The house in which he and his family were expected to spend every day of their year was a two room, single-story structure nearly seventy years old. It was, quite simply, falling apart.<sup>11</sup>

Living elsewhere—a solution practiced by several early keepers of the Edgartown Harbor Light—was simply not an option. There was no “elsewhere.” The nearest neighboring house was five miles away, and Edgartown village itself closer to nine if the trip was made by land. The trip by boat was shorter, and in 1867 the Lighthouse Establishment authorized construction of a boathouse on the shore of Cape Poge Bay to facilitate it.<sup>12</sup> The trip from lighthouse to boathouse was three-fifths of a mile over loose and shifting sand, however, and the boat trip itself was subject to the vagaries of wind, tide, and, in the winter, ice that choked the Bay and (in some years) even the outer harbor. The keeper was also, unless his wife or children were capable of tending the light in his absence, obliged to make the trip to town and back not just within a single day, but between the hours of dawn (when the lamp was extinguished) and dusk (when it was lit for the night). Especially in the short days of winter, every trip to town was a race against the clock.

The addition of an assistant keeper’s post to the Cape Poge Station in 1867 gave the principal keeper (then Edward Worth) relief from the need to be constantly on duty. Worth’s son Jethro—recently returned to civilian life after serving in the Union navy during the Civil War—took the job, which paid \$400 a year. The keeper’s salary was raised correspondingly, from \$350 to \$565 a year, but most of the difference was likely absorbed by postwar inflation. The extra hands were doubtless welcome, as was the chance for Worth to reconnect with his adult son, but the addition of a second family to the station did little to improve anyone’s living arrangements. The keeper’s

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11 Arthur R. Railton, “Cape Poge Light: Remote and Lonely, Part Two,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 25, no. 3 (February 1984): 91-123, on 96-97.

12 Railton, “Cape Cod Light, Part Two,” 105-106.



The oldest-known photographic image of the Cape Poge Light, showing the second (1844) tower and 1801 keeper's house. The edge of the cliff was a little under 50 feet away when the picture was taken in 1875. Two years later, the margin of safety had shrunk to less than 40 feet, but it would be several more years before new land was purchased and the structures moved inland.

house remained as small and cramped as it had always been, and the new assistant was housed in a one-room addition, 12 by 13 1/2 feet.<sup>13</sup>

The original four acres of land purchased for the light station in 1801 were all but gone by 1869, and an inspector's report filed that year recommended the purchase of four additional acres onto which the lighthouse and keeper's dwelling could be moved. The land was duly purchased, and the keeper warned to "give prompt notice" of further erosion, which Edward Worth dutifully did. On New Year's Day, 1874, he measured the distance from the cliff edge to the nearest corner of the house at 50 feet. Three years later, it was just under 40 feet, and a year after that—January 1, 1878—it was 36 feet. but (as before) prompt reporting did not trigger a prompt response. Both the keeper's house and tower remained in their 1869 positions when, in 1878, another inspector's report warned that the house would topple into the sea in two years if the cliff continued to erode at its current rate.

That, apparently, was sufficient to get the Lighthouse Board's attention. A representative of it arrived the following summer (August 13, 1879) to supervise the landing of materials for what would become a brand-new keeper's house: two separate sets of living quarters, totaling 14 rooms, under a single generous roof. There was even a porch on which to enjoy, when the weather was fine, the relatively few moments of leisure that the job afforded.

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13 Railton, "Cape Cod Light, Part Two," 106.

The house was finished by December, but the Worths were obliged to pass one more damp and drafty winter in the old one before taking possession of the new one on April 15, 1880. Once moved, they were assigned the hard—but, doubtless, emotionally satisfying job of tearing down the old house and barn. They could, the Board said, “have the wood for fuel, etc.”<sup>14</sup>

The Worths would, in the end, enjoy the new house for only a few years. Edward retired at the age of 70 in 1882, and Jethro, who became acting keeper on September 6 and (after passing the necessary examination) keeper on December 2. He remained in the post, however, for less than a year. He had a wife and a 10-year-old son (named Edward, after his grandfather) to think of, and when a less remote post became available the following year, he took it. On October 11, 1883, Jethro Worth handed off the Cape Poge Station to Keeper George E. Fisher, who would remain in charge for the next 15 years.<sup>15</sup> Both Fisher and George E. Dolby, who replaced him in 1898, had the entire house to themselves. The assistant keeper’s position was abolished upon Edward Worth’s retirement in 1882 and not reinstated until 1899.<sup>16</sup>

Keeper Fisher, who oversaw the station for fifteen years, did so with growing concern about the diminishing amount of land separating the tower from the edge of the cliff. He passed reports about it up the Lighthouse Establishment chain-of-command throughout the 1880s, and they met—as all such reports seemed to do—with studied indifference. Another report, filed by an inspector in 1889, recommended moving the tower within the next fiscal year. It, too, spurred no action. As with the Lighthouse Board’s decision to move and rebuild the keeper’s house, the eventual trigger was a drastic reminder of just how narrow the margin of safety had become. In his log entry for March 4, 1892, Fisher reported that: “The small house that stood to the East of the Light House went down the bank in the gale last night. The bank has washed away during this late gale from 3 to 5 feet in different places . . .” Fifteen months later, workers were erecting what the Lighthouse Board called “a new temporary light tower” further inland.

The move, when it came, was a triumph of seat-of-the-pants engineering. A new wooden tower—the one that still stands at Cape Poge today—was erected atop the bluffs: 35 feet high, like its predecessor, but 40 feet further inland. A temporary scaffold was erected between the tops of the two towers, and Cape Poge Light’s lens, lamps, and enclosing iron-and-glass “lantern” were dismounted from the old structure and inched across it to the new one. The entire process was completed on June 24, 1893, and although the date (just a few days after the Summer Solstice) was likely

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14 Railton, “Cape Cod Light, Part Two,” 110.

15 Railton, “Cape Cod Light, Part Two,” 113-114.

16 The possibility exists that it could have been a political sinecure created as a favor to Worth, but it is likely beyond proof.

chosen because it offered the maximum amount of daylight, all work was completed by 3:30 PM. There was ample time to fix the one pane of glass and one hinge in the lantern that had been damaged in the move, and perhaps even to enjoy the view, before the light was lit at sundown. The old tower was torn down the following week, and three years later, as if to confirm the wisdom of the move, the foundation stones on which it had stood began to slide down the cliff face and onto the beach.<sup>17</sup>

### Everyday Heroes (1893-1945)

The light that Keeper George H. Fisher lit on the night of June 24 burned kerosene. It had been converted from sperm-whale oil to less-expensive lard oil in 1867, and to kerosene in 1878. The light, however, was still passed through and focused by a Fresnel lens installed in 1857. The 1857 lens produced a fixed white light, but by the end of the nineteenth century, that was coming to be seen as a problem. The Cross Rip Light Ship, anchored in the midst of Nantucket Sound to mark one of its major shoals, also displayed a fixed white light, and confusion between lightship and lighthouse was blamed for numerous wrecks and groundings at Cape Poge. In 1898, therefore, the Lighthouse Board ordered that Cape Poge Light be changed to a flashing signal: two white flashes of 0.7 seconds each, a gap, and red flash of the same length.<sup>18</sup>

The new signal required a new Fresnel lens, made by Chance Brothers of England and installed over three days in June 1898. The lens itself consisted of glass prisms mounted in metal frames, that surrounded the lamp and produced the flash pattern as it turned. It was mounted atop a vertical metal drum, 19 inches wide, that rotated on 29 steel ball bearings. The drum, and the lens attached to it, was turned—like its first-order counterpart at Gay Head—by a clockwork mechanism driven by a falling weight. From the lantern room to the foundation, the weight had 35 feet in which to fall, and took 5 hours to do it. Keeper George Fisher, tending the light without an assistant to help him, was thus obliged to crank the weight back to the top of the tower five times a day, every day of the year. At least one of those times was guaranteed to fall in the middle of the night, subjecting him to near-permanent sleep deprivation.

Fisher complained, and two weeks after the new mechanism was installed a mechanic was sent to adjust it. The adjustment stretched the time between windings to seven hours, but it was too little, too late for Fisher, after fifteen years at Cape Poge, submitted his letter of resignation on Au-

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17 Railton, "Cape Cod Light, Part Two," 116-118.

18 *Report of the Light-House Board to the Secretary of the Treasury for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1898* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1898), 16.



The 1893 tower and expansive 14-room keeper's house that, for a brief time after it was completed in 1880, housed the father-and-son team of Edward and Jethro Worth, along with their families.

gust 23.<sup>19</sup> George F. Dolby, previously posted at West Chop, arrived with his family a week later and formally took over the Cape Poge station.

Dolby's four-year tenure at Cape Poge would not be a happy one. His young son Arthur died in the summer of 1899, and the loneliness of the station—even after the position of assistant keeper was re-authorized and filled later that year—gnawed at Dolby's wife and corroded their marriage. Dolby's family spent the winter of 1901-1902 in Edgartown, and when Dolby was posted to Great Point Light on Nantucket (another remote station) in the summer of 1902, his wife elected to take the children to live in Vineyard Haven. The family was reunited a few years later, but the Dolby's marriage had been irretrievably damaged, and they separated.<sup>20</sup>

Those who followed Dolby at Cape Poge faced the familiar challenges that came with the station: isolation, storms, caring for shipwrecked mariners, and simply making it to town and back. "Keeper absent from 11 AM to 3:45 PM for mail, supplies, etc." wrote J. E. Barrus on July 28, 1911. "Out in [gale] of 70 miles an hour, lost sail—torn to ribbons—rubber coat blown to pieces on his back. No more for me, thank you! J. E. B."<sup>21</sup> Still, he stayed, and persevered. The bearings in the lens clockwork were wearing out, and by late November

19 Railton, "Cape Cod Light, Part Two," 118-119.

20 See John A. Howland, "Family Tragedy at Cape Poge Light," *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 30, no. 4 (May 1989): 122-127.

21 Arthur R. Railton, "Cape Poge Light: Remote and Lonely, Conclusion," *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 25, no. 4 (May 1984): 150-181, on p. 156.

1911, the clockwork had broken down completely. For four long nights, Barrus and his assistant turned the lens by hand, until new bearings arrived on December 1 and they could repair the clockwork. Three years later, on a rainy night in July 1914, Barrus looked out the window of his house and saw that the lamp had gone out. His log tersely records what happened next:

Keeper in running to tower, slipped on the wet plank and fell, breaking bone in ankle. Managed to get in tower and start the light. Remained until 12, then called the Ass't keeper. The ankle is swollen badly and very painful today . . . Made a set of crutches . . . attended to usual duties.

The image of Barrus, hobbling on his broken ankle as he “attended to usual duties,” mirrors that of Crosby Crocker, mourning the deaths of his children, one after another, as he winds the clockwork and fills the kerosene reservoir at Gay Head: the everyday heroism of men who understood that the work, no matter what, had to go on.<sup>22</sup>

The work continued unabated as time went by. The kerosene-vapor lamp installed in 1910 continued to be balky and prone to blowing out on stormy nights, America's entry into World War I raised new security concerns, and the clockwork mechanism that turned the lens continued to need maintenance and adjustment. Henry L. Thomas, who had become keeper in 1919, managed as best he could, but just before Christmas in 1921 he received unwelcome news from the Second District office in Boston. Beginning with the New Year, his assistant would be posted elsewhere, and Cape Poge would again be a one-man station. The letter announcing this unwelcome change came with reassurances about automatic alarms what would alert him if the lens slowed down or the light flickered. He could go to bed at the accustomed time, and “all” that would be required, would be to rise at midnight to rewind the clockwork weight and refill the kerosene reservoir of the lamp. It could, he was reminded, be worse: The single keeper at Tarpaulin Cove had to tend a rotating light *and* a fog signal.

What Keeper Thomas thought of this “reassurance” is not recorded.<sup>23</sup>

The erosion of the bluff had continued, and the tower had been shifted fifty feet inland in October 1907. By May 1922, it was time for another move.<sup>24</sup> This was a record-setting 95-foot trip accomplished, in only three days, by a crew led by Assistant Superintendent Frank J. Morse of the Second Lighthouse District. Less impressive from an engineering standpoint, but more immediately valuable to the keeper's well-being, was the arrival of what Thomas described as a “Radio for Receiving” in January 1923. Commercial radio broadcasting was in its infancy that winter, and programming was limited in scope and variety, but to Thomas the radio was

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22 Railton, “Cape Poge Light, Conclusion,” 156.

23 Railton, “Cape Poge Light, Conclusion,” 161-163.

24 US Lighthouse Service, *Notices to Mariners*, March 17, 1922, 4.

a lifeline to the outside world. It allowed him to tune into weather reports, keep abreast of current events, and have entertainment to pass the time on long winter nights. The radio presumably stayed with the station, passing in turn to Marcus Pieffer (who became keeper in 1931), and Joseph H. DuBois (who took over in 1938).<sup>25</sup>

DuBois was the last of the fourteen keepers of the Cape Poge Light. In 1943, the station was automated: converted to a fixed, white, flashing beacon powered by storage batteries. A unit of 24 Coast Guardsmen and their dogs, charged with keeping up a 24-hour foot patrol along East Beach, were quartered there for the duration of the war, but when the war ended they left—no doubt gratefully—for other duties in more congenial places.<sup>26</sup>

### Alone (1945-present)

Cape Poge was the third of the Island's five lighthouses to be automated, and with the end of the war, responsibility for overseeing them fell to the keeper and assistant keeper of the West Chop Light. Octave Ponsart, transferred from the Cuttyhunk Light when it was disestablished in 1952, was the first West Chop keeper to be handed the extra work. Presumably with the Cape Poge station in mind, he was issued a war-surplus "bomb truck" that—thanks to its high ground clearance, four-wheel drive, and powerful motor—was well suited to the long drive from Edgartown village to Cape Poge.<sup>27</sup> Compared to the kerosene vapor lamp, heavy glass lens, and intricate clockwork of the old system, the new system was virtually trouble-free. The keeper's house, once an essential part of the system, stood empty and abandoned until 1954, when it was sold to Robert Marshall of Chappaquiddick. Marshall dismantled it and used the boards for other building projects, including a series of cottages, and with its disappearance the lighthouse stood alone on the bluff for the first time in its long history.<sup>28</sup>

The demolition of the old Edgartown Harbor Light in 1938 left the Cape Poge tower the last wooden lighthouse on the Island, and among the last in Massachusetts.<sup>29</sup> The "temporary wooden tower" erected in 1893 had become, if only by default, permanent. Its wooden structure, though outdated, gave it a unique advantage over more modern brick and iron towers: It was light enough, and its structure stable enough, that it could be picked up and moved as a unit. One such move occurred on August 30, 1960, when Ernest Duarte

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25 Railton, "Cape Poge Light, Conclusion," 167.

26 Railton, "Cape Poge Light, Conclusion," 179-180.

27 Seamon Ponsart Roberts recalls the bomb truck, and her father's expeditions to Cape Poge, in her memoir *Everyday Heroes: The True Story of a Lighthouse Family* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2013).

28 Railton, "Cape Poge Light, Conclusion," 169.

29 As of this writing, it is one of three wooden lighthouses in the state, along with Plymouth Harbor Light and Brant Point Light on Nantucket.



Robert Marshall and friends enjoy a picnic at the keeper's house in 1952. The house had been empty shuttered since the departure of the wartime Coast Guard beach patrols in 1945. Two years later, Marshall bought the house from the government as surplus, dismantled it, and used the boards from it to build summer cottages on Chappaquiddick.

jacked the tower off its foundations and, settling it onto a platform, shifted it 150 feet further inland using wooden rollers laid on a roadbed of planks.

The 1960 move was the longest in the history of the Cape Poge Light (four times the distance of the 1893 move), and it should, in theory, have bought as much as a half-century of security. After only twenty years, however, the cliff edge was once again worrisomely close to the lighthouse. The wooden tower is braced against the onshore winds by cables anchored in concrete blocks, and by 1984 the anchor for the cable on the north side was only 22 feet from the cliff edge. A square concrete basin half-embedded in the sand at the base of the cliff provided further evidence of erosion. It was a once-buried water cistern that had served the “new” (1880-1954) keeper's house. The site of the house had, in a little more than 100 years, been transformed from stable ground far from the cliff's edge to empty space above a wave-washed beach.

The brief time that elapsed between the sixth (1960) and seventh (1987) moves may have encouraged the Coast Guard to take extreme measures. Once a wooden lighthouse tower is lifted free of the soil—once daylight is visible between the lowermost timbers and the surface of the ground—it can, in theory, be taken anywhere. The Coast Guard put this idea to the ultimate test in 1987, moving the Cape Poge Light 500 feet inland in a single record-setting jump. The method employed also set a record: It was the first time that a Vine-

yard lighthouse was moved by helicopter. The (literal) heavy lifting was done by a Sikorsky Skycrane, capable of handling a maximum payload of 20,000 pounds. Intact, the Cape Poge Light tipped the scales at 19,000 pounds, so for the safety of the historic tower, it was moved in two pieces.

The lantern, weighing 5,000 pounds, was lifted to the ground, and (while disconnected from the lighthouse) prepared for shipment to the mainland, where it would be refurbished. The topless tower, now a svelte 14,000 pounds, was then ready for its journey inland, dangling below the Skycrane from steel cables and guided by ropes controlled by teams on the ground. When the time came to set the refurbished lantern back in place atop the tower, the Coast Guard called in a second, smaller helicopter for the job. Photographs from the *Gazette* show the lantern slung beneath a gleaming white Bell 204: the civilian version of the UH-1 “Huey” familiar from countless Vietnam War films.<sup>30</sup>

Since that moment of high drama, now over thirty years ago, the lighthouse and the land around it have been quiet. Tour groups arrive a few times a day in the summer, transported in four-wheel drive trucks by The Trustees of Reservations, but they stay only briefly. Surf-fishermen make their way north from Dyke Bridge, but their thoughts are elsewhere. The boats—yachts, fishing vessels, and the motor ferry from Oak Bluffs to Nantucket—that slip by to seaward, and the sea birds that wheel through the air above likely pay little attention to the shingled white tower on the bluff. They have other means of charting their course. The bluffs recede as they have done for thousands of years: base cut away by waves, face sloughing onto the beach, rim crumbling ever-further back. Someday, perhaps sooner than we imagine, it will be time to make the familiar decision again: Move the lighthouse, or let the sea claim it at last. Someday, the world may have changed enough that the second choice, once unthinkable, will seem like the right choice.

Someday, but not yet.



Intended to be temporary, the 1893 tower is now well into its second century of operations. Maintained by the Trustees of Reservations, it remains the most-remote and least-visited of all the Vineyard lighthouses.

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30 Julia Wells, “Back from the Edge, Cape Poge Lighthouse Move Set the Stage,” *Vineyard Gazette*, May 28, 2015.

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## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### Keepers of the Lights

Lighthouses serve the needs of those who “go down to the sea in ships”—signaling the position of headlands and harbor entrances, warning of hidden rocks and shoals—but their appeal is far broader. They mark the boundary between the land and the “great waters” beyond, the known and the unknown, the finite and the seemingly infinite. Even those of us whose sea voyages never take us beyond sight of land are drawn to visit them.

The Vineyard’s five existing lighthouses are among its most precious historic structures. Built between 1856 (Gay Head) and 1893 (Cape Poge) and situated (by necessity) on the unstable margins of the Island, they continue to exist today because individuals and organizations, on-Island and off, have repeatedly marshalled the time, treasure, and will needed to preserve them.

The Martha’s Vineyard Museum has, for well over half a century, been part of that process. The first-order Fresnel lens installed atop the Gay Head Light in 1856 and transferred to us when it was decommissioned in 1952 is one of the crown jewels of our collection. We act as stewards of the Edgartown and East Chop Lights, helping to ensure that they are maintained and opening them to visitors each summer. Our archives contain hundreds of images and thousands of pages of documents that tell the stories of all the Island’s lighthouses.

The Vineyard’s lighthouses, and the stories associated with them, belong to all those who love the Island. Whether viewed from sea or land, their message is one of hope, welcome and warning. They possess the magic charm of true romance. Something innate in all of us responds. We are privileged to be among their keepers.



Phil Wallis  
Executive Director



*The Weisman Postcard Collection, donated to the Museum in 2017, contains hundreds of portraits of Vineyard lighthouses, of which these are a small fraction.*

# Martha's Vineyard Lighthouses, Part 2



The current (1939) Edgartown Harbor Light in the late 1970s, surrounded by a beach made of sand trapped by the stone causeway linking the lighthouse to the shore.