



# CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## THE TARPAULIN COVE LIGHTHOUSE

In August 2001 The Coast Guard issued a twenty-five year license to the Cuttyhunk Historical Society covering the Tarpaulin Cove Lighthouse on Naushon Island. This was the culmination of a three-year effort by the Society, in partnership with the Naushon Trust, to become the caretakers for the site and structure. The lighthouse is a registered national historical site; the structure is considered an excellent example from the great age of lighthouse design and construction in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also, since the demolition of the Cuttyhunk lighthouse in 1947, the only standing lighthouse in the town of Gosnold. For an archipelago town like ours, a lighthouse is an historical structure of exceptional significance: our marine heritage defines us, and a lighthouse is the symbol of that heritage.

In the 19th century, Vineyard Sound is believed to have been the second busiest shipping passage in the world after the English Channel. It was also one of the most dangerous. Hundreds of vessels were drawn sideways onto the shoals as they sailed up and down the Sound. The complexity of the currents and the intensity of the commercial traffic led the young George Eldridge, Jr. to create charts in the 1870s showing the direction and speed of the tidal currents in Vineyard Sound. These charts he sold to captains entering the waters; from them grew *The Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book* that is published annually to this day. The lighthouses at Cuttyhunk, Tarpaulin Cove, Nobska Point, Gay Head, and West Chop, were erected and manned around the clock to protect this shipping.

Lighthouses are less important today, as shipping relies on the many electronic tools now available for navigation. As a

result, the Coast Guard has found itself in the position of managing historic structures of reduced navigational importance. The Coast Guard intends to continue to own and maintain the simple electric beacons within each lighthouse, but nonprofit historical preservation groups like the Cuttyhunk Historical Society increasingly have been granted ownership of the sites and structures to preserve and manage them.

The following account of the history of the Tarpaulin Cove Lighthouse, by Admont G. Clark, Captain USCGR, Retired (extracted with the author's kind permission from Chapter 33 of *Lighthouses of Cape Cod - Martha's Vineyard - Nantucket, Their History and Lore*, Parnassus Imprints, Inc., 1992), provides us a glimpse into the past of the lighthouse and the maritime history of the region.

Paul Elias

Paul Elias is a member of the Cuttyhunk Historical Society Board and a summer resident of Naushon.



Tarpaulin Cove Light today. Airview from *Lighthouses of New England* by Wally Welch.



Naushon boasts the fourth light built on our coast, after Boston Light (1716), Beaver Tail off Newport (1740), and Brant Point (1746), built by the town of Nantucket. Tarpaulin Cove Light was also built privately by Zaccheus Lumbert, formerly of Nantucket, in 1759. In addition he kept the tavern at the cove and maintained the light, thanks to Nantucketers providing the “Oyle out of their own courtesy.”

Three years later he petitioned Governor Francis Bernard for some relief from the expense of maintaining the light with these words:

*Zaccheus Lumbert ... Innholder [showeth] that he hath for the public good of Whalemen and Coasters built a Lighthouse at said Cove ... [which] has been the means of saving many vessels from being lost ..., he hopes that your Excellency will make him an allowance ... that he may be excused from paying any Duty of Excision on the liquors he sells.*

The governor ordered that he be paid six pounds! He kept up his light until 1764, when he gave up the tavern. The various tavern keepers may have maintained the light until 1818, when the government bought it.

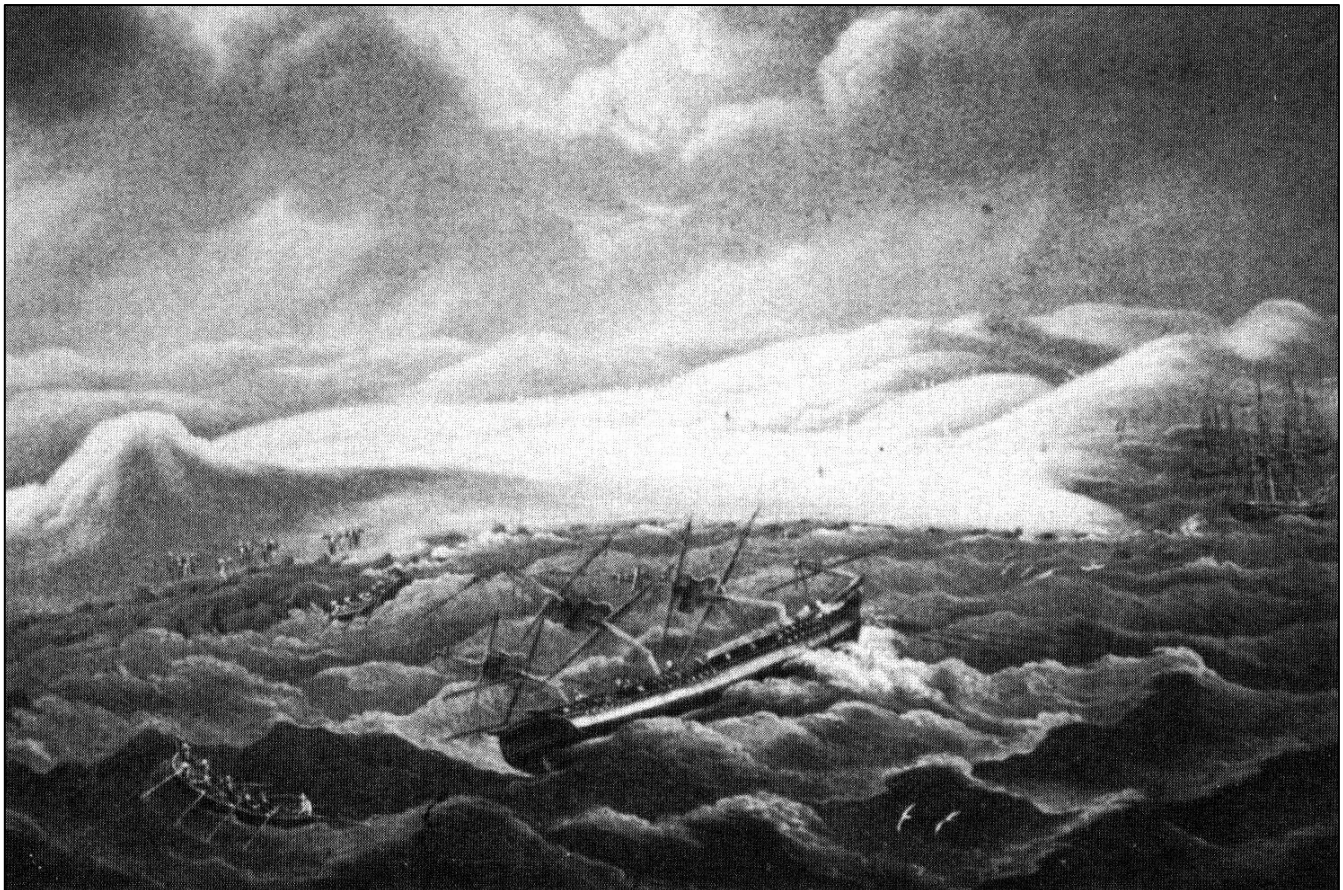
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Ships' logs and shipping records reveal that Tarpaulin Cove was a busy little harbor. Visitors of all kinds spent the night at the Tarpaulin Inn (later Cove House). Often several ships at once were anchored there, and the tavern rang with gaiety. The cove was also a natural market for the local farmers, selling to the ships.

Of course there were many shipwrecks through the years. One disaster was that of the ship *Perseverance*, which ran ashore at the cove on January 31, 1805. The first published report was in the *Columbian Centinel* of February 2:

*By Telegraph. The ship, Perseverance, Capt. Cook, 135 days from Batavia is ashore in Tarpaulin Cove and bilged. They want assistance! (Jan. 31)*

The newspaper went on to tell the story of the ship, built in 1794 in Haverhill, of 245 tons. Richard Wheatland, the first captain, made several voyages to Archangel in Russia and to China. In 1799 he met a French privateer which tried to capture his ship. After an hour-long gun battle the *Perseverance* crew beat off the Frenchman. Wheatland's account of the fight is in the **History of Essex County:**



The wreck of the *Perseverance* in 1805. From Amelia Forbes Emerson, **Early History of Naushon Island**.



*While our guns loaded with round shot and square bars of iron six inches long were plied so briskly ... that before he got out of range we had cut his mainsail and fore topsail all to rags and cleared his decks effectively so that there were scarce ten men to be seen.*

Wheatland retired and James Cook assumed command. On his way back from Batavia the wreck occurred. Fortunately, no lives were lost, and the cargo of coffee and sugar was saved. The ship was a total loss.

The island's proprietors were powerful. Because James Bowdoin opposed government acquisition of the lighthouse, there was an eleven-year delay between appropriation of funds in 1807 and action in 1818. He wrote many letters fighting the move, to Albert Gallatin, John Winthrop, and others.

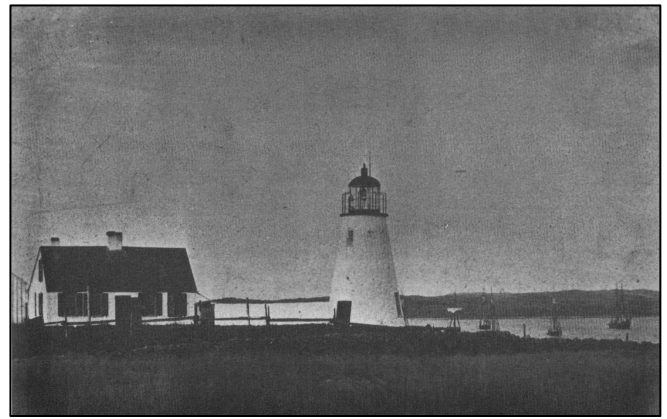
He offered to give the government land for a lighthouse and proposed that "the public interest may be benefited by employing my tenant as keeper of the light house & in that case much expense and trouble might be saved to the public." His opposition prevailed, and the project was delayed until after his death.

On June 12, 1817, Massachusetts ceded land for the lighthouse. In November the United States bought land for \$216, and construction (at a cost of \$6062.11) could begin. The tower, thirty-eight feet high and nineteen feet in diameter at the base, and keeper's house were of rubble stone. With the usual array of lamps, eighty feet above the sea, the fixed white light had a range of thirteen miles. Amelia Forbes Emerson's **Naushon Data** lists John Geyer as the first keeper.

Edward Carpender inspected in 1838 and wrote: "This is an inland light.... I must continue to recommend the reduction of these lights to the want of navigation." He also reported that the reflectors were defaced by the use of too short chimneys and that the stoned dwelling was defective.

When I.W.P. Lewis inspected the light in 1842, he reported that "The establishments at ... Cape Poge, Tarpaulin Cove, and Gay Head were found in a state of partial or complete ruin and all require rebuilding." The tower leaked from top to bottom, and the keeper had to chip ice off the staircase in winter. And the well was dry.

Finally in 1845 permission was granted to dig a new well, and we know what it cost from Geyer's logs. Francis Burt and William Cummings dug the well for thirty-five days at \$1.50 a day, and Tristram Cleveland took twenty-four days at \$1.50 to build the well. Geyer notes: "What Mr. Cummings done to it last fall was of



The first government-built Tarpaulin Cove Light.  
National Archives photo.

no use." He seems to have spent more time leaning on his shovel than digging.

John Geyer's annual report of supplies used includes 195 gallons of summer oil, 130 gallons of winter oil, 133 tube glasses (chimneys), and eight and one-half gross of wicks – over 1200 that year. Two years later he used only 180 wicks and twenty-four tube glasses. His pay in 1846 was \$87.50 per quarter, or \$350 per year.

In 1856 when Nathan Clifford was keeper, new Fresnel lenses were ordered for Tarpaulin Cove, Cape Poge, and West Chop. The manufacturer, Sautier et Cie. of Paris, provided them at 2604.5 francs each.

The heavy maintenance that these stations required is well illustrated by the Lighthouse Board report of 1868:

*89. Tarpaulin Cove – Wooden addition, 9 x 15, to dwelling built; new plank platform laid; privy repaired and resingled on two sides; boat-house roof patched and renailed, and doors refitted; eaves of dwelling resingled; two doors refitted and window sash and cellar case repaired. ... The boat-house is very much in need of repair, and it is proposed to build a new one next year. A covered walk from the tower to the dwelling is also needed.*

There were too many fixed white lights nearby. So when the new fifth-order lens went in on April 7, the characteristic became fixed white with a brilliant flash every thirty seconds.

Keepers came and went. After Nathan Clifford came Abraham White in 1861, followed by Samuel and William Skiff. In 1871 Captain Richard Norton, who lost his ship in the Civil War to the Confederate raider *Alabama*, became keeper. At that time both tower and house were painted white.

At last in 1888 something was done about the dilapidated, leaky stone house of 1818. The Board demolished it and on its foundation built a two-story house, 25' x 26', with an ell and a basement. Cost: \$3000.

Soon the tower, too, came down. It had been in such poor condition that during the Civil War it had been shingled. In 1891 a new brick tower, twenty-eight feet high, with a new fourth-order lens, took its place. A 1200-pound fog-bell and bell tower were installed. From April 25 to June 30, 1891, the light shone from a temporary structure.

The quiet years came and went – with fewer wrecks – until the 1938 hurricane, which devastated New England. It demolished the thirty-foot bell tower, which was not replaced. Finally, on September 4, 1941, Tolman Spencer, keeper since 1928, gave up his post and the light was automated. Since then it has been maintained by the Woods Hole Coast Guard Depot.

By 1958 the light was considered less important, and its candlepower was reduced from 7,500 to 700. Then in 1962 the house and other buildings were in a “state of collapse” and were torn down. In 1967 the Fresnel lens was upgraded to fourth-order, and since then it has been replaced by a 200 mm lantern. Today the light, seventy-eight feet above sea level, flashes white every six seconds, with a range of nine miles.

In her **Naushon Data** Amelia Forbes Emerson lists all the keepers of the light, with some discrepancies from other sources:

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1759-1764 | Zaccheus Lumbert                         |
| 1764-1817 | Cove Tavern keepers                      |
| 1818      | John Geyer                               |
| 1852      | Joseph R. Luce                           |
| 1853      | Nathan Clifford, Jr.                     |
| 1861      | Abraham C. White                         |
| 1864      | Samuel E. Skiff                          |
| 1869      | William E. Skiff                         |
| 1871      | Richard Norton                           |
| 1882      | Calvin N. Adams                          |
| 1886      | Frank S. Carson                          |
| 1910      | George A. Howard                         |
| 1912      | Frederick W. Field                       |
| 1916      | Carl Hill                                |
| 1920      | Frank Davis                              |
| 1928-1941 | Tolman Spencer, last keeper of the light |



*To help the Society restore the lighthouse, please direct tax-deductible contributions to The Cuttyhunk Historical Society, 21 Tower Hill Rd, Cuttyhunk MA, 02713, specifying "Lighthouse Fund."*



The new dwelling and tower (1891). From the Thornton Burgess Museum.