

ships for enemy submarines off the coastline. After WWII, however, the historical beacon shined brighter than ever, powered now by electricity.

The Blizzard of 1978. During the Blizzard of '78, furious seas borne on shrieking winds lashed against the island for days, eventually carrying away the granite pier. The crew sought refuge in the tower, fearing the old house would be swept away by waist-deep seas surging across the middle of the island.

Testament to American Ingenuity. Boston Light has withstood the ravages of nature, time, and man for over 270 years. It remains a proud symbol of American engineering, a monument to the brave mariners who perished in its shadow, a tribute to the keepers who maintained vigilance, and a staunch ally to all navigators who traverse the New England coast. Be sure to examine the names of past keepers etched in stone about the island. The oldest known inscription dates 1768.

Facts and Specifications. The conical granite tower stands 89 feet high, with a focal point 102 feet above sea level. The second-order Fresnel lens assembly weighs about five tons. The lens comprises 336 separate glass elements. It is priceless and irreplaceable. Except for a few museum items, spare parts simply do not exist. The 1000 watt light bulb inside the lens is fixed. The lens rotates, radiating 12 concentrated, equally-spaced light beams in all directions. To an observer, the beacon appears to flash every 10 seconds. Each 1.8 million candlepower flash is visible for 27 miles. The fog signal is automated.

Boston Light is self-contained. A commercial power line from Hull supplies the island's electrical needs, and a standby generator, located on the island, takes over if commercial power is interrupted. Rainwater, used for utility and consumption, is collected in cisterns that hold up to 20,000 gallons.

The keepers at Boston Light are active duty Coast Guard personnel. In addition to maintaining the light and structures on the island, they record meteorological data and verify the daily positions and operation of 25 aids to navigation.

Little Brewster Island was designated part of the Boston Harbor Island National Recreation Area in 1996, along with 29 other islands in the Harbor.

Suggested Reading

- Great American Lighthouses

By F. Ross Holland

- The Islands of Boston Harbor

- Lighthouses of New England

By Edward Rowe Snow



Department of
Transportation
U.S. Coast Guard

Boston Light

America's First Lighthouse



Boston Light, located on Little Brewster Island, has guided ships to safe harbor since 1716. It is the first lighthouse built in America. The scene of two Revolutionary War Battles, Boston Light was destroyed by the British in 1776. Rebuilt in 1783 by Governor John Hancock, Boston Light has resumed its vigil and stands as the last manned light in the country.

Born of Necessity. While the Massachusetts Bay Colony prospered in the 1600s, countless ships, cargoes, and human lives were lost to the treacherous, jagged rocks hidden by fog or lurking just beneath the waters of Boston Harbor. For a time, signal fires guided skippers; however, false fires lit in the wrong places by “wreckers” lured ships aground. These hapless ships were quickly plundered, their crews often left to the mercy of the seas.

In 1713, a lighthouse to mark the entrance to Boston harbor was approved. It was built of rubblestone, much like the present lighthouse tower. The “Lantern” was constructed of wooden frames and housed a semi-opaque glass lens. Its lantern was first lighted just before sunset, on September 14, 1716.

The First Keepers. Boston Light’s first keeper, George Worthylake, tragically drowned, with his wife Ann, daughter Ruth, friend John Edge, and slave Shadwell. They were travelling to the pier from a larger boat moored off the island when their canoe suddenly capsized, dumping everyone into the cold November sea. Ironically, the replacement keeper, Robert Saunders, also drowned two months later.

Help for Lost Mariners. America’s first fog signal sounded at Boston Light in 1719. It was simply a cannon, fired in answer to ships in the fog. This cannon is the Coast Guard’s oldest artifact, and resides at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn.

Force of Nature. The old tower was tried by man and nature alike. Fires and storms plagued the tower and lightning took its toll regularly. Ben Franklin’s lightning rod was not installed—many felt it was an arrogant challenge to the Almighty.

American Revolution. Even more devastating was the damage incurred during the war. The British controlled Boston Light for three months following their forced evacuation of Boston. In 1775, the Continental Army struck Boston Light twice, partially destroying the compound. In the first attack, colonists killed or wounded 12 men, and captured 33 British Marines, a party of carpenters, and two cannons. Only one American life was lost. In the second attack, the English demolished the tower with a time bomb, then left. Today’s tower was built in 1783, probably using remnants of the original.

Improvements at Last. In 1844, major renovations included the present 76 spiral stairs, the lantern frames, and entrance doors, all made from cast iron.

Young Love. Romance and lighthouses seem to go hand-in-hand. Harbor Pilot Albert Small proposed to Lucy Long, the keeper’s daughter, in the lighthouse tower. She accepted, and they wed June 16, 1853.

New Fresnel Lens. In 1859, the current second-order, Fresnel lens was installed after the tower was raised 14 feet to accommodate it. This superb optic added magnitudes of brilliance to the light, and gives Boston Light its present-day flashing characteristics.

Shipwrecks and Rescues. Several of the myriad shipwrecks around Little Brewster Island are noteworthy. On November 3, 1861, the square-rigger *Maritina* broke apart on Shag Rocks during a howling snowstorm. Corpses washed up at Boston Light for months afterward. One member of the crew is buried here. During March 1861, the schooner *Enterprise* struck the same ledge and was lost with all hands.

When the *Fanny Pike* struck the rocks between Middle and Outer Brewster in 1882, keeper Thomas Bates, his assistant, and resident Charles Pochaska of Middle Brewster, heroically rescued all aboard.

Wreckage from the five-masted schooner *Davis Palmer* washed ashore at Boston Light in late 1909. Sadly, the ship was lost with all hands on Christmas day.

The last major shipwreck occurred here on February 12, 1918, when the *USS Alacrity* went aground in the shadow of the lighthouse. Keeper Charles Jennings and his two assistants rescued all 24 crewmen by repeatedly pushing a dory out to the ship through surf, ice, and rocks.

First Natural Born Resident. Georgia Norwood was born at Boston Light April 11, 1932. She is the first person born at an East Coast lighthouse, and the subject of Ruth Carmen’s novel titled, *Storm Child*.

World War Two. From 1941 to 1945, the tower stood darkened against the night sky to avoid silhouetting