



An American Tour: 22



Massachusetts's Chatham Lighthouse

Chatham, nestled at Cape Cod's southeast corner, was named for an English seaport and incorporated in 1712. Maritime traffic passing the Cape was heavy by the nineteenth century. The waters off Chatham were a menace, with strong currents and dangerous shoals. Mariners talked of a ghostly rider on a white horse who appeared on stormy nights, swinging a lantern that lured mariners to their doom.

In April 1806, nine years after the establishment of the Cape's first lighthouse at North Truro, Congress appropriated \$5,000 for a second station at Chatham. A second appropriation of \$2,000 was made in 1808. In order to distinguish Chatham from Highland Light, it was decided that the new station would have two fixed white lights. Two octagonal wooden towers, each 40 feet tall and about 70 feet apart from each other, were erected on moveable wooden skids about 70 feet apart. A small dwelling house was also built, with only one bedroom. Samuel Nye was approved as the first keeper by President Thomas Jefferson.

In 1875, Keeper Hardy counted 16,000 vessels passing the lighthouse. He reported often on the serious erosion problems, but little was done to shore up the crumbling cliff. On September 30, 1879, the old south tower teetered 27 inches from oblivion. Another two months passed, and a third of the foundation hung over the edge. Finally, at 1:00 PM on December 15 the south tower fell to the beach below. Fifteen months later, the old keeper's house and the old north tower succumbed. By the early 1900s, the Lighthouse Board began phasing out twin light stations as an unnecessary expense. The north light was moved up the coast to Eastham to replace the survivor of the "Three Sisters" in 1923, ending 115 years of twin lights at Chatham. A new rotating lens was placed in the remaining tower, along with an incandescent oil-vapor lamp. In 1939, the Coast Guard electrified the light -- which had been fueled by kerosene since 1882 -- and increased its intensity from 30,000 to 800,000 candlepower. The light was automated in 1982. It remains an active aid to navigation, and the 1877 keeper's dwelling is used for Coast Guard housing. In August 1993, the top of the lantern was temporarily removed and new DCB-224 aerobeacons were installed.

The erosion near Chatham Light had slowed in this century, but in recent years a new threat has developed. Hurricane Bob and the ferocious "Perfect" Storm of October 1991 created a new break in the barrier beach east of the lighthouse. The time will come, sooner or later, when Chatham Light will have to be moved or follow in the wake of its predecessors.

[<http://lighthouse.cc/chatham/history.html>]

