

A Lightkeeper's Story

Benjamin Ellsworth, the Ipswich Lighthouse Keeper

Presentation by Gordon Harris

Greetings, I'm Benjamin Ellsworth, and I was keeper of the Ipswich lighthouse for 50 years, and I dropped in from Lightkeeper Heaven to chat with you tonight. Our lighthouse was located just to the right of the Crane Beach parking lot. I was appointed keeper of the Ipswich Lighthouse in 1861 by President Abraham Lincoln. But sadly, my wife died soon after I assumed the duties. On the brighter side, our daughter Susan lived with me and shared the lightkeeper duties for 41 years until I died in 1902. Up in lightkeeper Heaven, we have a lot of stories to share with each other. I have with me my old lighthouse ledger, and I would like to share some stories with you, some happy, and some sad.

Life of a lighthouse keeper

Now some of you might think it would be exciting to live at a lighthouse, or you might think it would be boring. But no, we stayed busy. We weren't lonely---quite the opposite. Town folks would stop by, because everyone loves the beach, and who doesn't love a lighthouse? The government proved us with a house next to the lighthouse, and I was paid \$600 a year.

It was my job to make sure the lights came on at sunset and went off at sunrise. When there were storms, I had to stay with the light all night. During the day, I refilled the tanks of oil that powered the flame and tended to the wicks. The inspectors required that everything had to be spic and span, so we spent a lot of time polishing the brass. It was very important that soot be cleaned off the lens every day.

During the day we guided sailors up the river, and warned them about the Ipswich Bar. You see the Ipswich sandbar every time you go to Crane Beach. At low tide you can walk on it, and at high tide the waves crash over it, but at any time it makes sailing into Ipswich tricky and dangerous, especially during stormy weather.

We were on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to respond to emergencies, and to use our lifeboat to rescue survivors of shipwrecks. I would like to tell you about a few.

The Deposit, 1839

I wasn't the first keeper of the Ipswich Light. That was Thomas Smith Greenwood, and those were very hard times for a lighthouse keeper. It was during a winter nor'easter in 1839 that the schooner Deposit ran aground close to the Ipswich Light. Keeper Greenwood heard the cries of Capt. Cotterall's wife over the sound of the pounding waves. He tied a rope to his waist and dived in and somehow swam 200 feet to the ship then climbed aboard. Then he used the rope to pull a dory and lifeboat that he had tied to the other end of the rope on the shore. The captain's wife and several of the crew were saved, but several crew members perished and they are buried at the cemetery at the South Green.

The Falconer

Have you ever picked up a lump of coal on Crane Beach and wondered how it got there? It was around 1832 that Ipswich folks started heating their houses with coal, and Water Street and the Town Landing were lined with coal wharfs. On December 17, 1847, the brig Falconer was loaded with bituminous coal and wrecked on Ipswich beach. The survivors were taken in by Ipswich families, but seventeen of the passengers and crew were lost, twelve of whom lie buried in the High Street Cemetery in one common grave. The rear of the procession from First Church on the Hill was just starting when the front of the procession arrived at the Old North Burying Ground. It was two terrible tragedies within 8 years.

Coal schooner Lucy M. Collins

Sixty years later, in August 1891, the Lucy M. Collins was bound from New York for Ipswich with 240 tons of anthracite coal when it struck the Ipswich Bar on August 19, 1891. The hull was cracked and another load of coal sank into the mouth of the Ipswich River. Fortunately, no lives were lost. The coal from that shipwreck still gets swept up on the beach to this day.

The Garibaldi, 1872

Most of the shipwrecks didn't result in human tragedy. The fishing boat Garibaldi was caught in the gale in March 1872, and was driven ashore on the Ipswich Bar, where it sank within two minutes. The captain and his partner clung to the mast the entire night, becoming delirious with the cold. They actually saw me walking the beach with my lantern, but I couldn't hear them, being so far out on the bar. Fortunately my daughter Susie went walking the beach at dawn and spied them with her sharp eyes. We mustered a crew and went to their rescue in the lifeboat. Then we took them to the lightkeeper's house, where Susan kindly cared for and fed them.

The Cecilia

In April of the following year, the Schooner Cecilia grounded on the Bar in a thick snowstorm at five am, and they too were cared for at our house. By that afternoon the ship was a total wreck and was swept in pieces on the beach.

The Alba and the Franklin

But not every ship was lost. In April 1877, the brig Alba from St. Johns was sailing for Boston with a load of coal and came ashore on the Beach in a thick snowstorm. We arranged for her cargo of coal to be unloaded, which was shipped on to Boston. That allowed the ship to be floated on the next high tide without much damage. A year later the exact same thing happened to the schooner Franklin, which was loaded with lumber, and it escaped without too much damage as well.

The Schooner Mashun

They say that lightning doesn't strike the same place hit twice, but you can't say that about shipwrecks. Let me tell you about the schooner Mashun, which in 1879 was headed to Ipswich and grounded at Crane Beach. Was I surprised, when the crew walked right up to my house! We managed to float the boat at high tide, and sent them to Gloucester for repairs. After being repaired, she returned to

Ipswich and she came ashore again on the bar and went to pieces. Stay away from the Ipswich Bar if you know what's good for you.

The new lighthouse

By that time, the old brick and plaster lighthouse that Capt. Greenwood commanded, and then myself, had deteriorated badly because of the salty air, so in 1881 the tower was replaced by the conical 45-foot cast iron lighthouse that you see behind me.

The Ada K. Damon

There was a great building boom in Boston after they filled in Back Bay and they needed sand for concrete and cement. And there was a lot of sand on the beaches in Ipswich and Plum Island. The ships they used to haul the sand were called sand schooners, and their captains and crew with the shovels and wheelbarrows were called Sanders.

You may have heard of or even seen the wreck of the Ada K. Damon. It was an 84-foot two-masted schooner built in 1875 by the H. A. Burnham Boatyard in Essex, and in her final years was being used to haul sand. On the day after Christmas, 1909, she stranded on Plum Island in one of the worst winter gales in history, and she was swept to Steep Hill Beach at high tide. It didn't take too many years before the hull was buried by the sand, which began receding at the beginning of this century. In September of the year 2000, the skeleton of the ship floated away during a coastal storm and broke into pieces. But some of those pieces keep floating back!

The Edward S. Eveleth

You would think they'd learn to stay away from the beaches, but in October 1922, the sand schooner Edward S. Eveleth got stuck loading sand at Steep Hill Beach, not far from the wreck of the Ada K. Damon, and with each wave it sank further and further. Sometimes during a very low tide, you might see the outline of the hull's frame still out there a few feet from the edge of the water.

Susan

It was a good life, a healthy life, but eventually I passed on in 1902, and Susan kept the lighthouse going for a while. In fact, she applied for the position permanently, but I guess the bureaucrats just couldn't imagine a woman lighthouse keeper, even though she had been helping me for 40 years. Living out there by the ocean kept us strong and healthy, and Susie lived to be the oldest person in Ipswich!

LeRoy Lane

The last keeper was LeRoy Lane, who lived at the lighthouse station with his wife, Angie and their three children. A school bus would pick the kids up in the morning and return them in the afternoon. What a wonderful place to grow up! Every year the Lane family would throw a Christmas party for Ipswich children at the lightkeeper's house, and the Flying Santa would fly over the house in a plane and drop a bundle of presents for the children. One year while entertaining the children, Mr. Lane called up to his wife, "Has Santa arrived with the presents yet, dear?" Suddenly, the bundle of presents came crashing through the skylight, and Mrs. Lane yelled down, "Yes, dear. We can start the party now."

Lighthouse moved to Edgartown

Well, nothing lasts forever, and eventually, so much sand had blown onto the beach that the Lighthouse was 1000 away from the water, half buried in sand. In 1939 the Coast Guard floated the entire cast iron lighthouse to Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard to replace a lighthouse that had been damaged by a terrible hurricane the year before. We loved the old lighthouse—it was like part of our home. By then, of course, I was long gone, but my daughter Susan and other Ipswich folks fought to save the lighthouse, but they took it anyway. Our cozy lightkeeper's house out on the beach stayed around for a while. When you drive into the Crane Beach parking lot, that's the spot where we lived. The boy scouts and girl scouts used it for retreats, but vandals burned it down in 1973.

But I am happy to say that the story has a happy ending, because the Ipswich lighthouse still shines brightly out in Edgartown.