



# Coast Guard Heritage Museum

at the U.S. Custom House in Barnstable Village, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

## Summer 2025 Newsletter

### Chatham's Lights

by Bill Amaru

That lighthouse, perched up in the front of the Chatham Coast Guard Station, has been sending its message to mariners since the early 1800s. The importance of this and every lighthouse that has stood on the country's shores since its birth cannot be overstated. While modern GPS navigation aids have simplified bringing a boat in or out of our harbors safely, it is still very reassuring to see a beacon guiding your way home.

Chatham has one of the very few major American harbor inlets that faces directly east. That means that mariners leaving Chatham Harbor must cross and recross the entrance facing directly towards the Atlantic Ocean – and the swells it carries. Many days in summer are fair and the seas slight, but winter produces crashing combers that, at night in particular, are dangerous and can present significant risk. The need for a guide to help position the boat for crossing the bar has been essential. That is what our lighthouse once did. It tells us: “Here – here is your way to safely cross.” Other lighthouses may indicate the light should be taken to port or starboard, or may indicate the risk of shoals, rocks or reefs. Chatham lights our way directly home – or again, it once did.

The first lighthouses (there once were two standing side by side) represented an important advance in safety for this maritime community. They were built in 1808, constructed originally of native white spruce, eight-sided, with bands of steel to help support the structures through gales and hurricanes.



The Chatham 1841 twin towers with lanterns installed in 1857. Called Twin Lights, until 1923 when one of two original towers was moved to Eastham, MA where it still stands today as Nauset Light. (National Archives)

The first lighthouse keeper, Samuel Nye, was appointed by then-President Thomas Jefferson. Having two lights in separate lighthouses set side by side distinguished the Chatham lights from others along the outer Cape that had various lighting schemes. Lighthouses adjacent to each other along a coast must show different lighting patterns and characteristics to distinguish them from their neighbors, thereby lessening the chance of confusion.

Not only fishing boats but packet sailing vessels carrying freight for the outer Cape would sometimes enter our harbors. It may seem strange, but as late as the 1990s, sailing vessels of around one hundred fifty tons would bring exotic hardwood lumber from the Caribbean and Central America to the several boatyards around Oyster and Mill Ponds. From this wood, highly skilled craftsmen have meticulously fashioned (and continue to fashion) beautiful seagoing launches, sailboats, and power boats that can still be found working our harbors and bays.

Today, a single lighthouse, built in 1882 and made of brick and steel, with a double-flash, stands by the inner harbor, no longer directly across from the inlet but in fact several miles from it. It stands nearly fifty feet tall and is visible 19 miles out to sea, when the air is clear and humidity low.

In the early 1800s, the wooden lights described earlier were very much able to move. Their location could be adjusted to match the march of the inlet up and down the beach. They did this because the

ever-inventive mariners of Chatham placed skids along what is now the beach road and rolled the lighthouses along the bluff to match the movement of the shifting inlets. From Claflin Landing to the tennis club ran a set of rails and skids set high above the harbor, and the lights sat on a flatbed system. Thus, they followed the inlet as it shifted throughout the years, always staying in line with an opening in the sea.

In 1882, two steel and brick lights were erected. Sixty-one years later, in 1923, one of the twin lights was moved to Eastham, and is now called Coast Guard Light. Its distinctive characteristic is a red and white pattern, repeating every ten seconds. The light at Chatham retains a white double-flash, reminiscent of the twin lights of one hundred and more years ago.

The U.S. Coast Guard now runs and maintains Chatham Light along with most of the lighthouses around the nation. The CG station we see today started its career as the lighthouse keepers house for the twins, added in 1882. Chatham native Joseph Hardy and his family were the first keepers to occupy the new house. Captain Hardy had started his career at sea when only thirteen. When he returned from sea duty, he became the keeper and remained in that role until 1899. His duties, as for all keepers, included daily cleaning of the glass surrounding the rotating light, winding the mechanism that turned the light, and keeping the whale oil wick trimmed for maximum brightness.



Modern day Chatham Light 2025

Chatham's fourth order Fresnel lens – now retired, yet still incredible – can be seen at the Atwood House Museum on Stage Harbor Road in season.

While many of our national lighthouses have been decommissioned or sold to private citizens as homes or museums, Chatham Light has a bright future. With a powerful 2.8 million candlepower electric bulb having replaced the kerosene or whale oil-fired flame and Fresnel lens once housed atop the tower. Chatham retains its distinction as the premier light on the outer Cape. Both Cape Cod Light (also called Highland Light) and Coast Guard Light (also called Nauset Light) have their places; mariners use them daily to approach the back side of the Cape. But Chatham Light is the only beacon on the Cape that still guides mariners directly home. As long as there is power to turn the great turreted light and electricity to power the modern incandescent bulb, it will remain that way.

The double-flash on the horizon in winter or summer from twenty miles offshore continues to send a welcome: "Come home – we're waiting for you."

William "Bill" Amaru is a life-long resident of Cape Cod, and a commercial fisherman for over 50 years. The Amaru family is very involved in the continuing preservations of the CG 36500.



Chatham Fresnel lantern & lens  
Chatham Historical Society, Stage Harbor Rd.

Atop the tower sat a Fresnel lens (pronounced 'fren-el'). The Fresnel lens is a masterpiece of optical engineering developed by Augustin-Jean Fresnel in the early nineteenth century. His lenses revolutionized the capability to magnify light, and thus for it to be seen over great distances, which saved countless

lives from a watery grave. Fresnel died a relatively young man at 39. His younger brother carried out his concepts and performed the needed engineering to turn Augustin's ideas into reality. His creations truly changed navigation at sea.

Those lenses are still used around the world and continue to guide mariners and fishermen home from the sea. Chatham Lights used Fresnel lenses well into the 20th century.

## Opinions

Found in the *Boston Globe*, Friday, August 1, 2025, in what used to be called Letters to the Editor: Opinions regarding the Coast Guard's review of buoy placement along the New England coast has raised several objections (2,800 comments and counting). Concerns were raised by readers who have only a basic compass or other analog navigational tool.

**"Our overdependence on digital tools could be our undoing in many emergency situations. The markers in the water guide our way. Let's continue to let the boater stick to 'red, right, returning' to guide them safely into port and not have to struggle with a smartphone in rough seas or foul weather."**

**"The Coast Guard should not remove vital bell buoys or similar navigational signals and markers that provide a lifeline to boaters whose vessels lack the electronics in the dark."**

And finally, **"Progress is not always progress"**.

# President's Report

It has been a mostly good summer here on Cape Cod, particularly now that we have some air conditioning in our building!



We held our annual Members Only Night on Saturday, 2 August. The "final oil-on-canvas color study" (30" x 32") of the Coast Guard Memorial for the Massachusetts State House was unveiled for the first time at

this event. The artist now begins work on the full size (8'x8') painting. This legacy piece of art is still on track to be completed later this year. (See our Spring 2025 Newsletter for more information.)

The event also included a talk by LCDR Kris Furtney who was serving as Ops Officer on the CG Cutter *Tamara* during her response to the 1991 Perfect Storm.



The evening ended with Evening Colors performed by the local U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps unit. The bagpiper is one of our new docents, Henry McCann.

Sadly, we lost a beloved and vibrant member of our museum family this summer. Mai Severy participated in many museum events, helping wherever/whenever she could. She met Coast Guard Petty Officer Don Severy in Dublin during a 1964 port call. They married four years later and in 2025 celebrated their 56th wedding anniversary. Retired QMCS Severy has been a truly dedicated volunteer at our museum for over a decade. Mai will be deeply missed by all of us.

Greg Ketchen, Captain, USCG (retired)

## FYI ...

### 1 April 1916 is the official birthday of Coast Guard aviation.

On this date, 3rd Lieutenant Elmer Fowler Stone, 1913 graduate of the United States Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction (forerunner of the USCG Academy), was accepted into the US Navy's new flight school in Pensacola, FL. On 10 April 1917 Lt. Stone USCG completed the flight training program, and since there was no Coast Guard air wing at the time, he was designated Naval Aviator # 38. In 1920, the CG resurrected its fledgling aviation program, established the first air station at Morehead City, NC., and designated Stone as CG Aviator #1.



# The History of Weather Stations ...

Information for this article was gathered from:

U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

*Oceanus*: the journal of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution  
*Proceedings*, the magazine of the U.S. Naval Institute

U.S. Coast Guard involvement with weather observation dates back to at least 1939, when its vessels were used as weather ships to protect transatlantic air commerce. This was in response to a 1938 crash of a Pan American World aircraft due to weather conditions. In January 1940, the Ocean Station Program was formally established under orders from President Franklin Roosevelt. The Coast Guard, in cooperation with the U.S. Weather Service, was given responsibility for its establishment and operation.

In February of the same year, the USCG cutters *Bibb* and *Duane* became the first vessels to make radio transmissions as "weather stations".

The U.S. Coast Guard used a network of weather stations to gather and disseminate marine weather information. These stations, along with others managed by the National Weather Service (NWS), contributed to comprehensive marine weather forecasts and warnings. The NWS provided weather information through various channels, including radio broadcasts and online resources.

The program was first known as the Atlantic Weather Observation Service and later shortened to the "Ocean Station" program. The Coast Guard used a network of weather stations to monitor weather conditions, providing real time weather data that was crucial to safe maritime operations.

Six-foot diameter helium weather balloons were released every six hours to gather and record water temperatures, and generate data from elevations as high as 50,000 feet. Additionally, these cutters served as aids to navigation for military and commerce vessels. They contributed to comprehensive marine weather forecasts and warnings because their radar and radio equipment was manned around the clock.

The weather ships also provided medical services to passing merchant ships and if needed, could serve as a search and rescue platform. This assignment could prove deadly. In 1942, the CG cutter *Muskeget* (WAG 48) a Coast Guard weather ship would be lost with all hands onboard after a U-boat attack.

Aircraft flying past an Ocean Station were required to radio the ship and provide a position report. There was always a pleasant exchange with the Coast Guardsmen on the ship. The ship would provide its location, and the range and



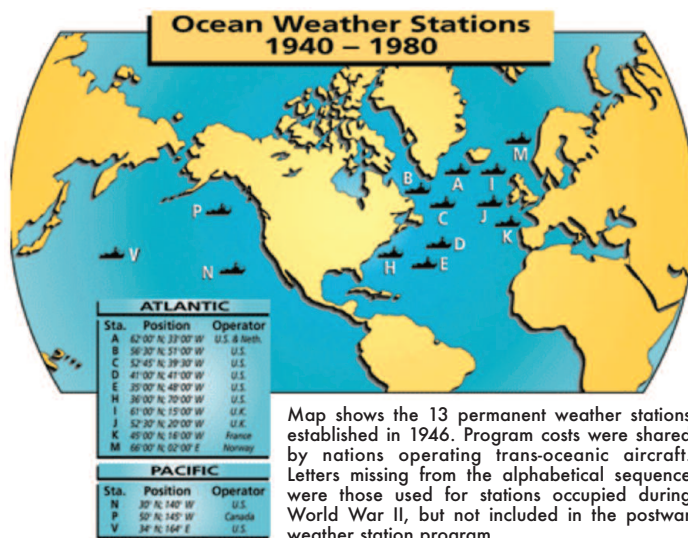
USCGC Seabago while on Ocean Station Echo 1965

bearing of the aircraft as relative to the ship. There were times, after hours of flying in weather conditions that deprived the planes of enroute navigational aids, the positioning assist was a most welcomed reference.

At the conclusion of the required communication, and if time and traffic allowed, most navigators would state: "Are there any other messages?" The Coast Guardsmen below, who were frequently on station for an extended time, would welcome the opportunity to send a greeting to a loved one back home. The airmen would reach into their navigation bag and pull out a "penny postcard" and write the message. Upon landing, the postcards would be mailed from the nearest postal box. It was a simple act of kindness to express gratitude for their help in completing their shared mission.

An Ocean Station map below showed an area shaped like a square with sides 210 miles long. Ocean Stations represented a postage stamp in square miles compared to the vast expanse of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Today, the USCG continues to play an important role in disseminating weather information to mariners, but weather buoys and satellites have largely replaced the need for manned weather stations.



# Force Design 2028 ...

from the USCG Force Design 2028

The USCG is embarking on a new organizational campaign with a 'focus on adapting the Coast Guard's structure to remain effective and responsive'. Per a directive dated July 3, 2025, issued from the Director of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, this strategic change aims to 'more accurately align districts with their areas of responsibility.'

Renaming operational districts revises a numbered system established during World War II, when the Coast Guard operated as part of the Navy to assure alignment between the services. In the 80 years since the Coast Guard separated from the Navy, the Service has maintained numbered districts. However, the Navy stopped using numbered districts over 25 years ago. Updating operational districts to regional names will more clearly align districts with their areas of responsibility, facilitate collaboration with interagency partners, and ensure the American public and maritime stakeholders can easily find and understand the districts in which they live, recreate and operate.

The new geographic names, approved by the Department of Homeland Security are as follows:

**District 1 is now the USCG Northeast District**

**District 5 is now the USCG East District**

**District 7 is now the USCG Southeast District**

**District 8 is now the USCG Heartland District**

**District 9 is now the USCG Great Lakes District**

**District 11 is now the USCG Southwest District**

**District 13 is now the USCG Northwest District**

**District 14 is now the USCG Oceania District**

**District 17 is now the USCG Arctic District**

The renaming initiative is not intended to alter the existing geographical boundaries or impact current operations according to Coast Guard Headquarters. The Coast Guard is also working to formally update the district names in the Code of Federal Regulations.



## Did you know ...

When the Statue of Liberty was first dedicated in 1886 by President Grover Cleveland, it was placed under the administration of the U.S. Lighthouse Board, officially categorizing it as a federal lighthouse. It was the first electrically lit lighthouse in the United States and became operational in that capacity on November 22, 1886. Illumination was initially provided by 15 arc lamps and 14 incandescent lamps.

The torch, held aloft by Lady Liberty, was intended to serve as a navigational aid for ships entering New York Harbor. But the statue's location on Bedloe's Island (now Liberty Island) was considered too far inland to effectively guide ships into the Port of New York, making it not very effective as a lighthouse. Additionally, maintaining the lighthouse proved to be costly and difficult.

In 1901, the Lighthouse Board relinquished control to the War Department, which already managed the military fort on the island. Due to all these factors, Lady Liberty ceased functioning as a lighthouse in March of 1902, after 16 years of service.

While the Statue of Liberty's role as a lighthouse was relatively short-lived, it remains an iconic symbol of freedom and democracy, continuing to illuminate the night sky with its symbolic torch.



# Coast Guard Heritage Museum

P.O. Box 161 • 3353 Main Street, Barnstable, MA 02630  
508-362-8521 • email: [cgheritage@comcast.net](mailto:cgheritage@comcast.net) • [www.cgheritage.org](http://www.cgheritage.org)

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Pat Garrity, *Editor*  
Bill Amaru  
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Greg Ketchen  
Nancy Viall Shoemaker



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Would you like to publish an article in our newsletter? Contact us at 508-362-8521.

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## COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM SCHEDULE HOURS

- Memorial Day to Columbus Day: Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-3pm
- Columbus Day to Veterans' Day: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, 10am-3pm

## BECOME A COAST GUARD HERITAGE MUSEUM MEMBER!

**Individual** - \$25 Single membership: attending annual meeting with no voting privilege, individual admission to the museum, and a 10% gift shop discount.

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**Supporting Member** - \$100 Unlimited museum admission & 10% discount. This is for those who want to support museum but not actively participate.

**Sustaining Member** - \$250 For those who want to show a greater level of support for the museum. Unlimited admission and 10% discount apply.

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We are a 501(c)(3) organization. Our mission is to preserve and share the story of the U.S. Coast Guard in the former U.S. Custom House, Barnstable, MA.