

Thacher Island News

April 2015 Newsletter
VOL 15 ISSUE 01

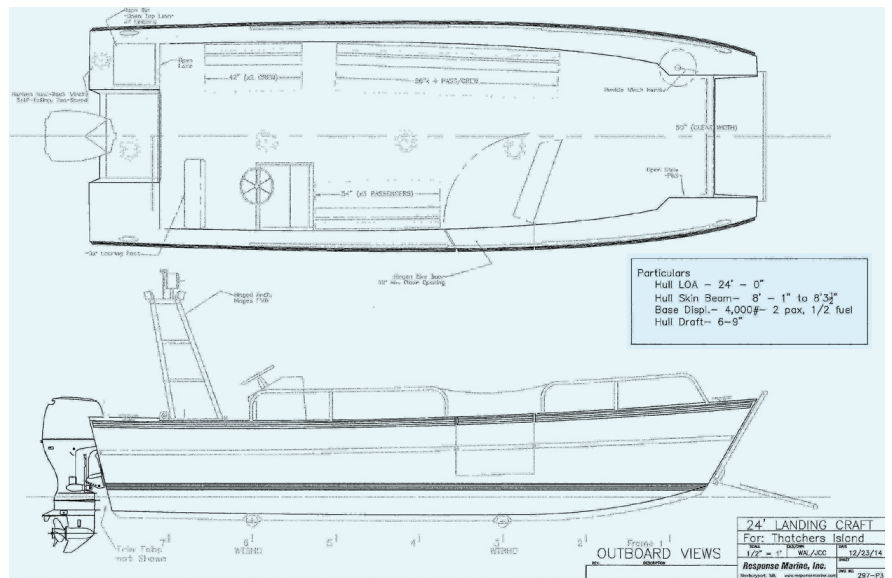


Membership: The Dance of Accessibility.

For hundreds of years, the earth and sea have danced with the people of Cape Ann. What people have built, the sea has swept away, leaving them to build again. What people have cleared, vegetation has reclaimed. Nowhere is that dance between nature and human history more evident than on Thacher Island. Those who look down from the North Tower's parapet can see a combination of what is accessible and what is wild. Those who visit the museum or pause to read interpretive signs can see what is still in use and what belongs more completely to the past. Those balances are important to the Thacher Island Association, which is committed to providing access to the island while respecting the dance of the natural world.

In addition to maintaining Thacher, the association is now in the process of clearing Straitsmouth Island's trails, developing a safe landing site for small craft, and rehabilitating the keeper's house in order to house a future summer custodian.

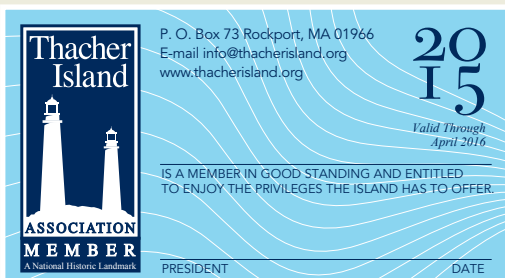
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Association Contracts for new “old” boat.

As one of our boat drivers recently stated “the old boat owes us nothing”. After serving for over 30 years the old Thacher I boat is being decommissioned and a new one has been designed and ordered by the Association. After conducting a detailed study of the old boat it was determined that it is unsafe for future use. The bottom needs replacement and topsides are wearing away significantly and the electronics and wiring need replacement. Paul St.Germain, president of the association, said “We feel that

building a new one that fits our current needs versus the cost to repair is the prudent and safe thing to do.” It will be built by Viking Welding and Fabrication LLC of Kensington, New Hampshire, in partnership with Response Marine, Inc. They have built 90 welded aluminum boats including over 20 fire/rescue boats since 1989. It was designed by Bill Lincoln of Response Marine of Newburyport, Massachusetts. Bill has been designing aluminum work boats for over 30 years.
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Work Crew Profile Ted Tarr

Ted Tarr has had a long relationship with local trails. As a teenager he often walked through Dogtown from Gloucester High School to his home in Rockport. Since the 1980s he has been leading Sunday walks in four Cape Ann communities. So it was natural that he would take a role in trail clearing and maintenance on Thacher and Straitsmouth islands.

Raised in Rockport, Tarr went to Gloucester High for two years before transferring to Governor Dummer Academy, then earning a biology degree from Washington and Lee University. A hitch in the Army took him to Hokkaido, Japan, with the Army Security Agency, where he listened in on Russian military broadcasts.

After his discharge from the service, he returned to Massachusetts. His choice of employment with a state lab that tested drug interactions on blood, and then with the research firm of Arthur D. Little, was driven by personal urgency: His fiancée had contracted non-Hodgkin lymphoma, and Tarr was hoping for a cure. When none came, he



Ted points to his nemesis, poison ivy all around him.

took a job with American Science and Engineering, where he developed biology curricula for middle and high school students. “Surrounded by sea creatures and lizards,” he was in his element. It was the perfect job for a man who, among other eccentricities, owned an alligator for 44 years. Alger Hiss, so named because Tarr knew not to trust it completely, grew from an 8-inch mail-order gator Tarr had acquired as a fifth-grader to a 6-foot reptile he’d take to the quarries on a leash.

Years later, when government funding for his American Science and Engineering project ran out, Tarr established his own company, ECOSYS, Inc, through which he offered land-use consultation to individuals and worked with conservation groups. In addition to leading nature walks, Tarr has spent years establishing and maintaining Cape Ann’s trails. He worked to establish Halibut Point State Park and the Keiran, Delamater, and Waring preserves in Rockport, and was one of the founders of Cape Ann Trail Stewards, an organization that matches volunteers with trails that require upkeep.

Over the years, Tarr has been a member of several Rockport boards, commissions, and organizations, including seven terms on the Board of Selectmen and 20 years with the volunteer Fire Department. When the Coast Guard closed the Thacher station, Tarr collected signatures for the petition that led to the selectmen’s acceptance of the island. He has been on work crew since the early 1980s, when the long-neglected North Tower was cleaned and repaired. While he credits other early volunteers for mucking out years of bird guano, Tarr claims the honor of having evicted the last living pigeon from the North Tower’s lantern room.

In keeping with his conservation background, Tarr belongs to a subset of the island’s work crew: those who maintain the trails. He is the go-to person on poison ivy, a plant with which Tarr has a love-hate relationship. He extolls the beauty of its foliage and its berries’ value as bird food. “It’s a wonderful plant,” he says, “as long as it stays 3 feet from the edge of the trail.”



Keeper William Daggett cared for a cow in the 1920's shown in front of the north tower.



These sheep were here in 1920 keeping the vegetation down for many years.



June Sears, who lived on the island with the first civilian keeper Russell Grubb in 1980, tended to the goats.

Cultivating History

Thacher Island’s twin granite towers command attention. Stories of shipwrecks and lighthouse keepers capture imaginations. But Thacher Island has another history: For much of its inhabited years, it functioned as a working farm.

The island’s first recorded agricultural use was pasturage for oxen, sometimes 14 at a time, between Reverend John White’s purchase of the island in 1719 and its 1771 purchase by the Massachusetts Bay Colony for the purpose of erecting a lighthouse. When the Cape Ann Light Station was established in 1773, the island’s occupants included several head of cattle and sheep meant to feed keeper James Kirkwood and his assistants. Right from the beginning there were problems, though none appear to have been with the animals. After 18 months of service, Kirkwood complained that, while they had received some provisions, the keepers had not received any of the 100 pounds or the firewood that had been promised them. He was paid 11 pounds, then was dismissed by British authorities for being unpatriotic. Kirkwood was rehired to do maintenance in the summer of 1775, but he left for Canada after being accused of holding Tory sympathies. (Why else would someone work for 18 months for only 11 pounds? the local patriots asked.)

In 1784, Samuel Huston, who was hired to repair the neglected towers, was told that part of his pay was to come from bringing 80 acres of the island into use as farmland and pasturage. In 1792, with the lighthouses almost ready to be

re-lit, a new principal keeper, Joseph Sawyer, was hired at a yearly salary of \$400. Alas, George Washington’s cash-strapped government reduced his pay to \$266 on the grounds that Thacher Island was so favorable for raising cattle and vegetables that the keepers could live on less than they’d been promised. Sawyer stayed on anyway, and was still on the island in 1814, when British foragers came ashore and dug up his potatoes.

Sawyer’s son was offered his father’s job at even less pay — \$250 a year. When he declined, the keepership went to Aaron Wheeler, who augmented his low salary by engaging in commercial fishing. In 1819, he and a friend sent 100,000 pounds of fish from Thacher Island to Boston. As paltry as the keeper’s salary was, the consecutive appointments of several related Wheelers created a flurry of criticism from residents on the mainland. The third Wheeler — Charles — decided to mount a media defense.

In October 1848, he appeared at the Gloucester Telegraph and News with a basket that the paper said contained “as fine a specimen of grapes as we have ever seen.” Less than a year later, Wheeler sent a letter to the paper defending his appointment by pointing out the amount of work he had done on the island: “I took charge of these lights Jan. 1, 1837, there was no person removed, my predecessor resigned. When I moved onto the island there was no fence, except a small garden fence about 50 feet square for which I paid my predecessor \$30. There were no trees, bushes, roots or vines under cultivation, and the island was covered with Canada

thistles. Since then, I have set out apple and pear trees, quince, currant and gooseberry bushes, and blackberry, raspberry and grape vines all of which trees and bushes have arrived at maturity and for the last year or two I have had the happiness of sitting with my family and friends, under these trees and receiving the rich reward of my labors, by gathering the fruits. My children, also, have, for their amusements, cultivated a small flower garden, for which they have been high praised and handsomely rewarded by the ladies and gentlemen who have visited the island during the flower season. I have cleared about two acres of land, and built about 140 rods of stone wall, and 40 rods of wooden fence. I have got the island under a good state of cultivation, so that I have kept seven cows this year, and I have been for a year or two past, reaping the rewards of my hard labor . . .”

As the job of maintaining lighthouses became more professional, career keepers were assigned to Thacher, and many brought their families with them. From the late 1800s through the 1920s, there were five families living on the island, sometimes with as many as 11 children among them. Provisions from the mainland could not be depended on in rough weather, and certainly could not be kept fresh without refrigeration. All the families cultivated gardens and kept poultry for both eggs and meat. Some also had pigs, goats, cows, and sheep, the latter for wool as well as meat. Pigs were brought to the island as piglets in burlap sacks. Cows presented a bigger challenge. *Continued on page 8*



Apple Tree Project

Apple trees lie hidden in the undergrowth across the length and breadth of Thacher Island, calling attention to themselves primarily in the fall, when some of them produce enough fruit for keeper's cobblers and casual work crew snacking. Led by Donna Cusick, a group of work crew members has been pruning out the undergrowth around the trees, both to increase the trees' health and to better illuminate the island's agricultural past. Samples of Thacher apples sent to professor William G. Lord, fruit specialist at the University of New Hampshire, were identified as likely being 20-ounce, Ben Davis, and Winesap or Staymen varieties, while others were unnamed, chance seedlings.

Although apples are among the most long-lived fruit trees, with a life span of up to 80 years, their productive lives are more reliably 30 to 40 years in length. It's impossible to know which trees on Thacher are the heirs of those planted by early keepers, but the positions of many of them, especially those behind the keepers' houses, seem too conveniently placed to be accidental.



Donna Cusick and her mates Linda Berard, Ann-Patrice Hickey and Linda Bosselman have freed the apple trees to blossom once again.



New Straitsmouth Island Landing Facilities Planned for this Summer.

As we progress with the rehabilitation of the keeper house on Straitsmouth Island it has become clear that new and safer landing facilities are needed for the workers. The island has no ramp or dock and all volunteer landings occur at high tides either on the north side or at the Gap on the western end of the island depending on weather and wave action. This spring volunteers have designed and agreed to build temporary landing floats which can be moored in the Gap area on the western end of the island. Construction began in early April at Granite Pier. The plan is to create one 16' by 12' main float as a landing platform. In addition a series of smaller 16" by 6" wide finger floats will be built that will form a walkway from the large float to the island. These will have guard rails allowing our workers to more safely

access the island. Each float will be anchored to the shoreline with chain and cable spring lines and allowed to rise and fall with the tides. They will only be used during the summer months, June through August, and be towed back to Granite Pier for winter storage. A series of 24"x48"X 12" special polyethylene, environmentally friendly, molded floats are installed under the wooden frame of the float. Each wood float is reinforced with specially designed galvanized steel inside and outside corner brackets, connectors, angle ties and end cap hardware. Peter Bergholtz and his carpentry crew will be constructing these floats on Granite Pier in April. The hope is that these new floats will allow access to the island at anytime of the day and we will not be restricted by tides.

Membership: The Dance of Accessibility.

From page 1

All but the most specialized work on both islands is carried out by volunteers, but fuel and building materials are not free. Funds raised through memberships purchase those materials and are reflected back in the form of privileges of access. In addition to the satisfaction of helping to preserve a National Historic Landmark, members receive two newsletters a year and are entitled to free transportation on the Thacher Island launch. (Visit www.thacherisland.org for details.) Landing fees are also waived for current members who reach the island by kayak or other private vessel. A new launch is needed this year and your membership and donations will be most welcome.

Please be a part of the organization that promotes public access to Thacher Island. (and someday Straitsmouth Island)

Renew your membership or become a member now by sending a check in the enclosed envelope or renewing online at www.thacherisland.org.

Association Contracts for new "old" boat.

From page 1

The head boat driver, Tom Eldridge along with Syd Wedmore and Paul St.Germain have been working with both groups for the past three months to design and develop a new boat that will serve the particular needs of hauling materials, volunteers and tourists to the island.

The boat will measure 24 feet long (about 2 feet longer than the old boat) with a slightly wider 8"6" beam. It will be of double hulled 3/16"aluminum construction throughout, welded watertight cockpit deck, self bailing with transom scuppers. The bow door will be much wider than the old boat at 50 inches allowing tractors and other wide loads to be easily loaded. A side entry door with drop down bench seats is part of the design which will allow us to accommodate nine passengers including crew and make

it handicapped accessible. A hinged "flying" arch for electronic antennas and navigation equipment will be provided over the cockpit area. It will be propelled by our 135 hp Honda engine from the old boat which is only a year old.

Viking has promised delivery for June 1st to enable the association to maintain its tourist and volunteer passenger schedule for the 2015 summer.

The Association is soliciting donations from its membership as well as donor foundations and private groups for funding this \$60,000+ vessel. "We hope members will consider donating to this effort when they renew their memberships for 2015" said St.Germain. See the attached envelope and membership renewal story.



Humane Society
of the Commonwealth of
Massachusetts awards
\$10,000 grant
for Straitsmouth
Keeper House.

No this is not the animal humane society but actually the oldest charitable society in Massachusetts going back to 1786 and was the forerunner of the original US Life Saving Service.

It was modeled after the British Royal Humane Society. The society members were concerned with the needless deaths resulting from shipwrecks and drowning and wanted to find ways to save lives. They developed lifesaving huts and rescue boats along the coast, organized swimming lessons for Boston public school children and raised funding to create Massachusetts General Hospital and others. A Medal Awards Program was instituted before the country had such institutions such as the US Coast Guard. The medals served to recognize rescue efforts along with financial stipends acknowledging individuals who took extreme risks to themselves to save the lives of others. It served as a model for the US Lifesaving Service and ultimately the US Coast Guard. By 1871 the Humane Society was responsible for 78 lifeboats and 92 huts along the Massachusetts coast.

Today their mission continues as a non-profit charitable organization to focus on public education and training programs aimed at safety on the waters. They do Academic and Medical Research related to lifesaving techniques and continues to support life saving entities and lighthouses such as ours.

Thanks goes to Peter Bergholtz who wrote the concept paper describing the funding request and its relevance to the Humane Society's program focus. This is the second grant we have received from the Society; the first was last year which was for the restoration of the Thacher Island Fresnel lens now on display at the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester.



This was the original farm pasture and garden area as seen from the north tower.

Cultivating History

From Page 3

According to one account, keeper Cecil Kelly used a dory to get a cow to the island, urging it out of the boat to swim the last bit of distance to the ramp. The bull he brought over after that was less docile. He and his helpers had to tie its legs together to keep it from overturning the dory.

Families had an ample supply of cow and goat’s milk. Fresh fish and lobster

had preserved meat before, but they were so cheered by their success, they moved on to canning mackerel (three whole fish to a quart jar), chicken, and eggs. According to Florence Kelly, the wives started canning in early summer and continued into autumn. In addition to meat and fish, they had wild strawberries and apples for jam and a variety of vegetables from their gardens.

Thacher Island underwent a number of changes over the years. The need to keep animals and cultivate crops declined with the introduction of motorized dories that allowed more regular supply trips from the mainland. The Coast Guard crews that rotated onto the island to maintain the lights kept down some of the brush, but the automation of the lights, with a subsequent withdrawal of personnel from the island, led to an explosive growth of cat briar, sumac, and poison ivy.

There was one more brief period of agriculture on the island. Russell Grubb, the first civilian keeper after the Coast Guard left, arrived on the island in December 1980 with a dog and cat for company. In the spring a local farm loaned the island a ram and ewe, which soon produced a lamb. In a vain attempt to contain the rapidly proliferating poison ivy, a herd of goats was sent to the island aboard a boat dubbed Noah’s Ark. Then a friend showed up with five chickens, whose egg production plummeted whenever the fog

horn blared.

As year-round keepership became impractical, so, too, did animal



Anyone interested in making beer? These hops are growing wild. We could call it “Thacher Island Light Beer”.

husbandry, even for the purpose of groundskeeping. These days, whenever the possibility of goats is mentioned, someone remembers their run-ins with visitors. “They were nasty little creatures,” work crew member Ted Tarr recalls. “It was as if they looked for people to go after.” The island is currently maintained as a wildlife sanctuary, with a focus on nesting birds. Thacher’s days as a farm are probably over, but walls, foundations, and the wild descendants of grapes, hops, and apple trees bear witness to the island’s fruitful past.

(Much of the information for this article came from “Thachers: Island of the Twin Lights,” by Eleanor C. Parsons, Phoenix Publishing, 1985.)

Thacher Merchandise

Thacher Island laser-engraved time-and-tide clock
14-inch solid cherry frame with birch-laminated face. Jeweled movement, battery included. Made in the USA by EMA Clockworks.

*\$130.00 plus shipping & handling.(\$7.00)
(Order time 10-21 days.)*



Tide Clock item # TC 202



Time Clock item # TC 101



New Thacher Island Polo Shirts.
100% Pima Cotton. Luxurious & silky. Honeycomb pique texture results in a lofty fabric with a silky feel. Made by Port Authority.

*Sizes: Sm., Med., Lg., XL
Available in Navy (PS-1) or White (PS-2).*

Thacher Belt
One inch wide web/cotton with Twin Lights and schooner design, full grain leather tabs, brass buckle.

*Sizes: 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42
Order one size up from pant size.
Item # B-100
\$28.00 plus shipping and handling.*



Go to www.thacherisland.org to see the other Thacher merchandise including, hats, T-shirts, books, shirts, vests and sweat shirts.

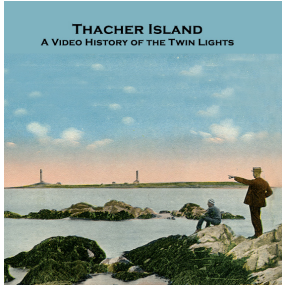


Thacher Island Winter Scene Prints.
Watercolor prints and note cards by James Mann.

*Note Cards 5X7 with envelope, set of 6 cards. \$18.00
5X7 Print (with white mat 8X10). \$10.00 each
8X10 Print (with white mat 14X12). \$15.00 each*

“Thacher Island-A Video History of the Twin Lights” DVD video.
This 20 minute video is divided into five parts that includes the story behind the wreck of Anthony Thacher in 1635, the building of the first towers in 1771, a review of the various lighting arrangements used over the past 240 years including how the Fresnel lens works, the construction of the second set of towers in 1861 and stories of some of the lighthouse keepers.

*\$15.00 plus shipping and handling.
(\$2.50) V-101*



Fresnel Lens Commemorative Coins.
This 1 ¾” coin celebrates the return of the original First Order Fresnel lens to Cape Ann. Now exhibited in the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester this coin is a lasting memento. Each coin is enclosed in a plastic capsule. Limited quantities are available.
\$12.00 plus shipping & handling.(\$2.50) F-100



Thacher Island Sand Dollars.
Thacher Island Sand Dollar Ornament is 3 ¾ “in diameter. Has decorative sea shell and hanging ribbon. Created by hand in the U.S. using natural sand dollars and shells specially preserved.
*\$12.00 plus shipping and handling.
(\$2.50)*

Order on-line at www.thacherisland.org or send checks to Thacher Island Association, Box 73, Rockport, MA 01966.



Thacher Island Association
P.O. Box 73
Rockport, MA 01966

ON THE WEB: www.thacherisland.org
EMAIL: info@thacherisland.org

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How to Get to Thacher Island.

Reservations accepted starting May 18.

BY LAUNCH.

From June 17 to September 5, the island association launch will carry visitors from T-Wharf to Thacher on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. Each round trip allows passengers two hours to explore the island. Seats cost \$20 per adult and \$10 per child under 14. (Launch Fee is waived for all Rockport residents and paid up Thacher Island Association members.) The trip is not recommended for children younger than 3, and, because the island is a wildlife refuge, it's off-limits to pets.

Starting May 18, reservations can be made by calling 617-599-2590 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

BY OCEAN REPORTER WATER TAXI.

Contact Captain Bill Lee at 978-502-5994 or oceanreporter@comcast.net.

BY KAYAK OR OTHER PORTABLE CRAFT.

After landing on the ramp, all vessels must be carried past the boathouse.

BY SAIL OR POWER BOAT.

There are three guest moorings available on a first-come basis. For further information, call the keeper at 508-284-0144.

Except for launch passengers, a \$5 user fee is charged to anyone over the age of 14 who comes ashore on Thacher. The fee is waived for Rockport residents, paid up members of the Thacher Island Association, and holders of National Park Service America the Beautiful passes or Federal Duck Stamps. Check the website: www.thacherisland.org for additional details and launch times.

DATES TO REMEMBER

May 18

Launch reservations accepted.

June 15

Thacher Island Association Annual Meeting at Rockport Community House.

July 10

Annual Lighthouse Cruise around Cape Ann.
Check the web site for details www.thacherisland.org

www.thacherisland.org

Credits:

Written and Edited by;

Sharron and David Cohen and Paul St.Germain

Photos by;

Paul St.Germain, Sharron Cohen, Donna Cusick, Darlene Fulton and Dick MacPherson

Thacher Island Winter scene watercolor used with permission of ©James Mann; website: jamesmannartfarm.com.

Image is from MASSACHUSETTS & RHODE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSES:

Illustrated Map & Guide, from Bella Terra Publishing

in May. This watercolor is available in note cards, and matted prints 5X7 prints and 8X10 prints from the

Thacher Island Association. See page 7 for details.