The open-air, waterfront restaurant was created in 1896 by Captain Emerson B. Haskell, a lobsterman who supplemented his income by hiring out as a ship’s pilot. When he sighted a ship approaching Rockport Harbor, he rowed out to meet it. His deep voice, calling out his offer to guide the vessel past reefs and underwater hazards, earned him the nickname “Foghorn” Haskell. Emerson often cooked his own lobsters on the rocks at Loblolly while keeping an eye out for potential piloting opportunities. He started offering clambakes to some of the crews and captains as a thank you for hiring him. Over time, the word got around and locals came to him for clambakes, too.

Realizing that there was more profit in waiting tables than waiting for vessels to pilot, Emerson built a restaurant on the shore of Loblolly Cove. An old boat house formerly used by the Humane Society of Massachusetts to house supplies for shipwrecked mariners was converted into a kitchen. Working with his son Frank, Emerson built a dining deck from pieces of wrecked vessels that had washed up on Thacher Island, the Dry Salvages, and the reefs near the entrance to Rockport Harbor. There was plenty of wood to choose from — during the camp’s 47-year existence 45 shipwrecks occurred off Loblolly Cove — but the first piece of the dining deck came from a schooner swept up on Thacher.

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Work Crew Profile PETER HASKELL

Man With A Past

Peter Haskell has celebrated every Christmas of his life in the Rockport home that belonged to his father and grandfather before him. That grandfather, Peter Kerr, who designed the former Town of Rockport seal and redesigned the Bassin-killing-the-bear sign that has long symbolized Bearskin Neck, created a wide variety of fine art and decorative furnishings. Examples of his work are displayed among the dizzying array of art, historical photographs, and family heirlooms that line the walls and fill the rooms of the home Peter shares with his wife, Claudia.

Peter’s great-grandfather Emerson B. Haskell ran Haskell’s Loblolly Camp, where he and Peter’s grandfather Frank put on lobster bakes and rowed visitors to Thacher Island. Frank’s cousin James Allison was a Thacher Island keeper in the first decade of the 1900s, but it wasn’t until 2016, after his retirement, that Peter sat on Thacher Island — when his neighbor Tom Eldridge recruited him to serve as sternman on the island’s launch.

Peter’s original goal in life was to be a social worker, but his first job after college was with the state Department of Youth Services, as night supervisor. His first job after college was with the state Department of Youth Services, as night supervisor. “I found the human side of the job very rewarding,” he said.

Peter’s career has included being a Boy Scout leader and a member of the West Gloucester Trinitarian Deacon Board. He was a Boy Scout leader for three years.

During those years, Peter raised his stepchildren and married Claudia Garvey Melanson, who brought her own children to a mix that now includes four children and five grandchildren. Because Peter has always felt that the Kerr-Haskell house “should be a place that everyone can return to,” the grieving couple hosts a list of visiting relatives. “Sometimes it seems that Claudia is always changing sheets,” he said.

Even before his retirement, Peter was involved in a variety of activities. He was a Boy Scout leader when his children were younger and had chaperoned since 1984, working out of an 18-foot Eastern he keeps at Grindle Pier. Claudia and Peter have been active members of the West Gloucester Trinitarian Congregational Church, where they served as deacons for three years.

In addition to being the keeper of much of his family’s documents and heirlooms, Peter also buys and sells antiques. The activity started as an attempt to find works by his late grandfather but quickly became a wider interest. He attends flea markets and antiques sales all over New England, resettling most at Todd Farms in Rowley. It provides a bit of extra income, but his deeper motivation is a desire to see historic objects preserved and in the hands of those for whom they might have meaning. That applies, especially, to Thacher Island. An old ship’s wheel, salvaged on Thacher, brought to the mainland by James Allison, and long stored in Peter’s basement, was donated to the Thacher Island Museum. He has provided photographs and information about Haskell’s Loblolly Camp and the Allison family to the association’s president and historian, Paul St. Germain. The past, which is a big part of Peter Haskell’s present, is one of the things he feels he has to offer to Thacher Island’s future.

Maria Herrick Bray is the subject of legend. Several, in fact. Edward Rowe Snow claimed that during one storm she climbed both Thacher lighthouses every four hours with a baby in her arms and a toddler in tow. Eleanor Parsons, his wife, Claudia.

Peter paints the way to boat driver Tom Eldridge aboard the Thacher launch.

Maria Bray sits at a dining-rose table with one of many ship models he has collected.

Even Taller Than Her Legend

In the spring of 2000, the Coast Guard launched a 175-foot coastal buoy tender named Maria Bray. Enroute to its assigned base in Mayport, Florida, the cutter’s captain invited members of the Thacher Island Association to join the crew in casting a ceremonial wreath into the waters near the island in memory of the woman who kept the towers lit in 1864. In September 2017, the Maria Bray was deployed to assist in the aftermath of hurricane Harvey, which devastated the coastal community of Rockport, Texas. In a pre-deployment interview, the vessel’s commander, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Tomsai, said the crew was prepared to replace buoys, assist in opening shipping lanes, execute searches and rescues, and deliver humanitarian aid. Summing up, he said, “Whatever they need us to do, the Maria Bray is willing to provide it.” That’s a fitting epitaph for the legendary heroine of Thacher Island.

Maria Bray April 25, 1828 - June 18, 1921.

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Maria Bray in Gloucester, 2000.

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Maria Bray in Gloucester, 2000.

Maria Bray is willing to provide it.

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Emblematic

The heraldic crest of the US Coast Guard Cutter Maria Bray blends Coast Guard symbolism with elements that are specific to Thacher Island’s history. Blue, red, and white are the Coast Guard’s colors, while green symbolizes Thacher Island and Cape Ann. The oars refer to the life-saving mission of lighthouses. The compass rose stands for navigation and command of coastal waters, as does the ship’s wheel that stands between Thacher’s twin towers. The trident, which signifies maritime authority and prowess, has three tires to recall the three nights that Maria Bray tended the lights in the absence of her husband and his two assistants.

USCGC Maria Bray (WLM 562) ship’s crest, which is affixed to the vessel’s interior superstructure.

Thacher Island Association members Bob Smith, Paul St. Germain, and John Krenn join Thacher keepers Driftie and George Carroll aboard the USCGC Maria Bray in May 2000.

Maria Bray April 25, 1828 - June 18, 1921.

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Maria Bray is willing to provide it.

That’s a fitting epitaph for the legendary heroine of Thacher Island.
Emerson and Frank, both skillful marketers, expanded their business to include boat trips to Thacher and fishing trips with rods and reels for rent. They even offered a baby-sitting service.

Famous Customers

Governors, ambassadors, artists, actors, authors, university professors, as well as locals and summer residents, enjoyed the rustic dining at Haskell's Loblolly Camp. Sometimes he came with his children, one of whom, John Hays Hammond Jr., built Hammond Castle in the late 1920s. In August 1910 the elder Hammond brought the 27th president of the United States to dinner. President William Howard Taft, Hammond, their wives, and a contingent of Secret Service men arrived at Loblolly Cove in three large motor cars. Many of the others in their 32-person party arrived by yacht.

A front-page story in the Gloucester Daily Times read that “President Taft enjoyed the Clam bake at Rockport.” Perhaps he enjoyed the red, white, and blue streamers with which the Haskells had decorated their outdoor deck, or the relative seclusion and the beautiful surroundings. Most certainly President Taft, who was known for his appetite and girth, enjoyed the food.

Another friend of Hammond, actress Alla Nazimova, dined at Haskell’s Loblolly Camp while making the movie “Out of the Fog” on Straitsmouth Island in 1919. He had these tickets printed to promote his new service.

Funding Goal Reached.

The ramp construction is planned to begin in May and be completed by August in the Gap Head inlet shown here. (Courtesy Vincent Nappa.)

Emerson Haskell and his wife, Naomi, had seven children, one of whom married Thacher Island keeper James Allison. All four girls and three boys worked in the family business over the years, but it was Frank who took over when Emerson died in 1929. He and his wife, Ardie, operated the restaurant until 1943, when diminished patronage caused by the Depression, World War II, and gasoline rationing forced him to close the business, ending a nearly half-century run feeding a diverse clientele and fueling Rockport’s fame.

Thanks to Peter Haskell for these photographs.

The construction crew of NAPCO has completed a three-year project to restore the exterior and interior of the c.1878 keeper house located adjacent to the lighthouse. The seven-room house features two bedrooms, a bath, parlor/museum, kitchen and dining room, sitting area and solar control room. An effort was made to minimize the carbon footprint of the house by incorporating a variety of green technologies, including an indoor compost toilet, a triple filter water system which utilizes rain water and recycles the water for the house, and purifies the “gray” water produced from sinks and washing machine. It features its own solar power electric system and five video web cams for security purposes. Propane is used for an instant hot water heater, refrigerator and stove. Other than these modern enhancements, the house was restored to its original look using original building plans dating from 1875. These same plans were used to build the principal keeper houses on Thacher Island as well as Seguin Island and Petit Manan, Maine, Baker’s Island in Salem, Nobska Point, East Chop, and Nauset Beach on Cape Cod. Period furnishings have been collected and a small visitor center and museum will be available to the public in the parlor. Plans are to house volunteer summer keepers at mid-summer to watch over the island and welcome visitors. It is interesting to note that the first keeper house built in 1835 cost $4091.29. The final cost to restore the house to its original splendor 180 years later was over $400,000! Half of this cost was born by Mass Audubon for the external restoration work. Rockport Community Preservation Commission and other major donors provided the balance.

Straitsmouth Keeper House Readies for Occupancy.

For the past two years the Thacher Island Association has carried on a campaign to raise $350,000 to build a boat ramp on the western end of Straitsmouth Island. That goal has been achieved thanks to several major donors, including the Manton Foundation, Massachusetts Seaport Economic Council, Rockport Community Preservation Commission, Belinda Foundation, Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, F.M. Global Foundation, Mass. Audubon, James Family Trust, Hildreth-Stewart Charitable Trust, and HE Thompson Foundation. In addition, a total of $70,000 was donated by friends and members of the association, furthering ongoing efforts to open Straitsmouth Island to provide safe access to the public for the first time in 80 years.

The ramp construction is planned to begin in May and be completed by August. Once the ramp is completed, an official opening ceremony will be held to honor supporters, donors, and members.
Rockport’s islands may be timeless, but technology is not. Thacher Island Association president Paul St. Germain discovered that as he waded through a maze of “parallel images,” “adaptive themes,” and “breadcrumbs” to have the Thacher Island website redesigned. “Website technology has advanced so much that we were being left behind,” said St. Germain about the need to provide a smoother, simpler, and more dynamic way to deliver information about the islands.

St. Germain enlisted the help of Go-Daddy, one of the nation’s largest web hosting and development services, in the effort to modernize the site and make it easier to navigate. Go-Daddy has hosted the Thacher site for the past 8 years.

The site features a new “shop” page, which makes purchasing Thacher merchandise, memberships, and Lighthouse Cruise tickets more efficient. It also features videos, historic photographs, copies of recent newsletters, and links to the islands’ live webcams and weather station.

Check it out at www.thacherisland.org.

February of this year marked the 40th anniversary of the Blizzard of ’78, when the region was hit with 27 inches of snow, Motif No.1 toppled into Rockport Harbor, 3,500 vehicles were abandoned on Route 128, 54 people died, and the vessel Can Do was lost with its five-man crew while going to the aid of the tanker Global Hope.

Though not as severe, this past winter broke a 116-year record set in the winter of 1917-18 for the longest stretch of days below 20 degrees. Several times between December 29 and January 6, the wind chill reached as low as minus 7 degrees. On January 4, winter storm Grayson, referred to by some meteorologists as a “bomb cyclone,” created wind gusts of 50-to-60 m.p.h. Continued on Page 9
Continued from page 7

At 12.1 feet, Rockport Harbor’s highest tide since the Blizzard of ’78 covered T-Wharf with a 2-foot surge of water that ran as far as Dock Square. Jim Cantore of the Weather Channel waded through ankle-deep sea water as he broadcast a warning to motorists parked on T-Wharf. (https://youtu.be/SMiR4saA6QE)

Thacher Island’s ramp, which was damaged in a series of March storms, will require repair before tourists launch trips can resume for the 2018 season. The Thacher Island weather station, mounted on the assistant keeper house chimney, lost its ability to transmit wind speeds when a gust tore off its anemometer. The island’s volunteer weather expert, Ken Baker, has purchased a more robust unit to take its place.

It wasn’t all bad news. The cold air moving over warmer water created a beautiful form of fog called sea smoke. The striking photos of Thacher Island with sea smoke curling around the towers were taken by Gloucester photographer and Thacher Island Association member Kim Smith. She also took the photo used on the masthead of this issue.
Sandy Bay National Harbor of Refuge and the Navy Book available May 28.

New book recounts history of the Sandy Bay Breakwater and the Navy visits in the 1900s.

In 1885 construction began on the second largest deep-water harbor in the world, second only to Cherbourg, France to be called the Sandy Bay National Harbor of Refuge. It would consist of a giant 9000-foot granite breakwater that would offer safe harbor to over 5000 vessels and enclose an area of 1600 acres. As it was being built, the U.S. North Atlantic Fleet began making annual visits to Rockport with their newest and largest warships, including most of Teddy Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet.” These visits were designed to facilitate the fleet’s training maneuvers in the waters off Cape Ann as well as demonstrate the need for a protected harbor for national defense and security. Over a 30-year period, 21 annual visits occurred, with more than 100 naval vessels including battleships, cruisers, torpedo destroyers, submarines, dispatch yachts and other support craft anchoring in Sandy Bay Harbor. Paul St. Germain, local Cape Ann author and historian, and a Rockport resident for twenty years, has written three other books in the Images of America series. He has drawn from the Sandy Bay Historical Society archives, official U.S. Navy files and other private collections to develop a revealing record and interesting history of the building of the breakwater, the men, the ships and the events surrounding the Navy visits that occurred from 1899 to 1919. The book will be released on May 28. It will be available on our web site, local bookstores and Amazon.

Play Ball!

In the early 1900s, when Rockport selection deniers visiting naval crews permission to play baseball on Sundays, Admiral Robert Evans had a baseball diamond built on Thacher Island, which, as federal property, was unaffected by the local Blue Laws. The Thacher ball field was in addition to the Thacher Island, which, as federal property, was unaffected by the local Blue Laws. The Thacher ball field was in addition to the Thacher Island, which, as federal property, was unaffected by the local Blue Laws.

The fleet baseball champions of the USS Iowa in 1907 played the USS Kentucky team on Straitsmouth Island for the title. (Courtesy Naval History and Heritage Command.)

USS Connecticut (BB-18) leads the Great White Fleet out of Hampton Roads, Virginia, on its world tour in 1907.
2018 Membership Renewals Due Now!
Check the address label on this newsletter above to see if you are paid up for 2018!

If the number next to your name is 2018 then you are paid through May 1, 2019! If not, now is the time to renew. Use the envelope stitched into this newsletter or go on-line to our web site to pay by credit card at www.thacherisland.org

Membership is one of the islands’ most important funding elements for everything from maintenance to preservation projects. For example, Thacher’s South Tower needs more than $250,000 in stone and brick work repairs on the gallery and lantern decks. Renew today.

www.thacherisland.org