

I. Hannah Thomas at Gurnet Point Light Station, Massachusetts, 1775-1790

When John Thomas told his wife in 1775 that he was raising a regiment to go and fight the British, she must have said, "But what about the lighthouse?"

Perhaps he replied, "I know you can handle it, Hannah. And the fee for keeping the lights will be very useful to you while I am gone."

Several years earlier John Thomas had been asked by a committee appointed by the General Court of Massachusetts to build and support a lighthouse on land he owned on Gurnet Point. That long narrow spit of land formed the protective northern arm around Plymouth Harbor. The agreement was recorded in Plymouth County courthouse on February 23, 1769.

Massachusetts Bay Colony paid Thomas rent of five shillings for his land and £200 a year to act as keeper of the lighthouse. In 1771 John Thomas's account of the expenses for Gurnet Point Light for the period of November 14, 1770, to November 14, 1771, included "40 measures of cotton weak [wick] yarn, £6.13.4; 50 measures of Candles, £1.133.4; one Lanthorn, 6 shillings; Carting of sundry items, £1.3; and a tin pail for carrying oil, 8 shillings."

Later correspondence gave the dimensions of the light: "The old Light House was of Wood 30 by 18 feet and 22 feet high, there were two lights raised 18 feet on Octagons at the ends of the Building." Each small tower contained two lamps—America's first "twin lights." The lanterns were constructed of heavy wooden frames holding small, thick panes of glass. They

protected the lamps against the weather. A mariner could see that these twin lights were different from the single Barnstable Light nearby. The two Gurnet Point lights could be lined up to give a mariner his ship's exact location at that one point.

A lighthouse keeper worked seven days a week. The lamps at Gurnet Point had to be lit and kept burning every night. By 1775 the tallow candles used in the earlier lanterns in the colonies had been abandoned. Their light was too feeble to be seen from any distance. At Gurnet Point four flat-wick lamps (also called bucket lamps) were used. Each had four large wicks that had to be trimmed every few hours to make them burn brightly.

The lamps burned whale oil, which gave off toxic smoke. The soot coated the lantern glass and dimmed the light. The oil in the lamps had to be replenished two or three times during the night and the glass wiped clean. At dawn, the lamps were put out and cleaned.

When John went off to war, Hannah saw to it that the lights were lit and kept burning every night during the first year of her husband's absence. The legislative records of the Massachusetts Bay Council contain her petition "praying for an allowance [for keeping] the Light House on the Gurnet at the entrance [of Plymouth Harbor] one year five months and Nine days [ending the] 23 Day of April 1775, at which time the Lights were Extinguished."

Nothing is known of Hannah Thomas's experiences through the long years of the War for Independence. After the first year, Hannah no longer lit the lamps because they might aid enemy ships.

The American colonists who declared independence in 1776 had no navy—a disadvantage throughout the Revolution. Hostile sailing ships of the British Navy, armed with cannon, prowled up and down the Atlantic coast. They attacked and captured unarmed commercial vessels. British naval commanders must have studied the dozen lonely lighthouses that marked the hazards and harbors. If those landmarks could



Replacement twin towers were built at Gurnet Point in Plymouth Harbor in 1842. Shown here in the 1850s. Courtesy of the National Archives, #26-LG-7-11.

be put out of commission, or better still, destroyed, then the colonists' commercial ships would be even easier to attack.

A garrison was stationed on Gurnet Point to protect the lighthouse. People living nearby built a crude fort around the twin towers to protect them. Nevertheless, a gun battle with a stranded British frigate offshore damaged the walls of the lighthouse.

John Thomas never came home from the war. Appointed a brigadier-general and commander of the colonial army in Canada, he died there of smallpox.

Two years after the fighting ended, the Massachusetts legislature received a petition from Hannah Thomas. In the February Session in 1785 the legislature granted a second petition, stating that the "benefit and privileges of keeping and tending the light house on an island called the Gurnet, at the entrance of Plymouth harbor, is reserved to the said John, Hannah, and John [their son], owners of the said island" Hannah asked that she be given "the barrack [erected] on her land at the Gurnet . . . for the damages done to her house, fences, etc., while a garrison was kept at that place."

Widowed and needing money to raise her children, Hannah continued in the role of lighthouse keeper. Although many lighthouses after the war were put in the hands of veterans, records for the years 1786 through 1789 show that Hannah was still in charge, paid £80 a year by the Massachusetts government. She also hired male helpers. In 1786 Nathaniel Burges signed a document, witnessed by her two sons, agreeing to “tend and keep the lighthouse situated on the Gurnet socalled, and at all proper times to light the lamps and keep the same lighted, in all respects faithfully to discharge the duty of a lighthouse keeper.”

The ninth law passed by the new Congress in 1789 created the lighthouse establishment—one of the earliest public works in our country. In 1790 the new federal government took over all the lighthouses on the Atlantic coast, including Gurnet Point. The U.S. Lighthouse Establishment was assigned to the Treasury Department. Every contract, large or small, as well as the appointment and salary of every keeper, was personally approved by President Washington.



A single tower stood at Gurnet Point in 1958, surrounded by traces of Revolutionary War earthworks. Courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

On March 19, 1790, Superintendent of Lighthouses Benjamin Lincoln wrote Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, as follows:

Mrs. Thomas, the widow of the late General Thomas, . . . has been considered the keeper of the lighthouse at Plymouth. The house stands on her land . . . The man who keeps the lighthouse for her has trouble with the improvement of the island. This however, is a private bargain between Mrs. Thomas and the keeper.

John Thomas [Hannah's son] went to Lighthouse Superintendent Lincoln in 1790 asking to be appointed keeper at Gurnet. Mr. Lincoln wrote the Secretary of the Treasury as follows:

I have now with me Mr. Thomas, son of the late General Thomas, whose mother has the care of the lighthouse at Plymouth. When she was first appointed to that trust, he was a minor; otherwise he probably would have had the appointment himself. He is a young gentleman of good character and I think is a fair candidate for the appointment under the United states.

In 1801 the lighthouse at Gurnet Point burned. The land on which it was built still belonged to the Thomas family. Congress appropriated \$2,500 in 1802 to buy the land and new towers were erected in 1803. The Thomas family received \$120 for the land on which the lighthouse stood. The towers were rebuilt again in 1842.

Although the need for twin towers was eventually eliminated by better optics, two lights were maintained at Gurnet Point long after most others were abandoned. Not until 1924 was one of them discontinued and the tower removed. The second tower survives and continues as an active aid to navigation.



Much of the information in this chapter comes from copies of documents in the private collection of Richard M. Boonisar. Also from National Archives Record Group 26, "Letters Received by the Treasury Department, 1785-1812" and "Lighthouse Letters, 1792-1809."