

# Yankee Pluck at Bird Island Light

By LAWRENCE B. ROMAINE

WILLIAM S. Moore, author of the letter herein reprinted, is one of the millions of "Little Guys" who have made America's unwritten history. The dates of his birth and death are not available. A glimpse of his childhood and a record of his lean and slippered pantaloons have been lost in the smoke of spring house-cleanings over the years. He must be accepted or rejected as a Yankee record on the merits of two long, well-written, and detailed letters which have survived.

Our institutions are overflowing with important manuscripts, documents and letters of our political and literary leaders. Such priceless records and reminiscences will be preserved and published again and again for each succeeding generation. What of the thousands who played the minor parts, held the line in our Revolution and War of 1812, and yet never had an opportunity of carrying the ball over the British goal line? Should they be entirely forgotten? And those hundreds who guarded our coasts in the first lighthouses, and suffered through the bitter winters in line of duty? The unknown geniuses who burned the midnight whale oil trying to create for mankind conveniences and safeguards, yet never received a small smile from Dame Fortune or a nod of approval from the patent office. Shall they be entirely lost to American history?

These letters were written at Bird Island Light in Buzzards Bay at the entrance to Marion Harbor in 1821. It is just possible that the first, dated February 25, might have been written in just

such a blizzard as we all remember in 1956. The lighthouse was built, according to Edward Rowe Snow, author of *Famous Lighthouses of New England*, in 1818, because of the growing commerce of the town of Rochester. To those who know the quiet little town of Marion as it lives today, a few lines from John Hayward's *New England Gazeteer* published in 1839, may better justify the government's expenditure in 1818: "Rochester, Mass. A large maritime town on Buzzard's Bay, 9 miles from New Bedford and 48 miles from Boston, Inc. 1686. Population in 1837—3,570. Manufactures consist of vessels, salt, bar iron, boots and shoes. Value \$101,811. Vessels engaged in the whale fishery—9—\$71,568. A number of merchant vessels belong to this place, and numerous coasting and fishing vessels." The light was erected thirty feet above the sea in a stone tower twenty-five feet high. The dwelling was also built of stone. It was abandoned some years ago and the government sold it to a private individual who planned a summer residence. The hurricane of 1938 pretty well demolished it; the tower and foundations still stand as a sort of American Stonehenge.

With this background of a once busy Yankee port, you are ready to read and better understand Mr. Moore's first letter. You might even drop in at Marion this summer and see for yourselves what is left of a once important New England lighthouse. You might also wonder what became of this veteran of the War of 1812, who, in spite of unfair government debts and other troubles, still man-

aged, on a salary of \$400 a year, to leave behind a record of the inventories he hoped might solve his problems.

Bird Island, February 25th, 1821.

"SIR:

"I have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your favor of the 12th inst. noticing my communication upon a mechanical subject. I enclose a few observations upon other subjects under consideration, without drawings, and altho' they may not be considered of the first importance in a pecuniary point of view, they have served at times to relieve my mind from the embarrassments and perplexities I have encountered in my pursuit of a more important subject. I will beg you, Sir, to excuse the imperfect and hasty manner in which I have described them.

"In relation to my account for the present quarter, it may be proper for me to observe, that having an unsettled account with the Treasury department, and being unable to settle it so soon as I had expected, I pledged my salary to cover any balance that might be due from me, and fear I shall hardly be able to do myself justice in the affair.

"Owing to a combination of circumstances, such as the variety of instructions under which I acted, leaving sundry papers in the hands of my captain who died at French Mills, my own carelessness in not taking vouchers and making charges of money expended at the proper time etc., I am not a little embarrassed—.

"At the time of being in the Army and at the time of my resignation, I had real and personal property unencumbered to a greater amount than all that passed through my hands whilst in the service. At the time of my resignation, I made an

estimate of my relative standing with the War Dept., and judged the receipts and expenditures to be about equal; the matter remained in this situation until I saw sometime in September last a law requiring the attention of all who had unsettled accounts with the U. S.—By a statement accompanying Mr. Wagner's letter I found that I had received about \$1,400. and expended or rather accounted for between \$1,100. and \$1,200. In the further process of settlement I find that eight or ten soldiers duly enlisted, paid, and sent to places designated by my superiors as the general rendezvous etc. were unknown to the War Dept.

"I travelled by special orders whilst in the service over 2000 miles for which I never made any charges or took vouchers, and in many other instances kept much the same kind of accounts. About \$30. is due for clothing allowed for a servant not at the line, some for quartering recruits—expenses on march—over \$20. for pay to a sergeant who was good enough to desert with \$40. more just because I forgave him the first offense, reprimanded him for a second and took measures to punish him for a third. The balance found against me was \$220. If I could do myself justice, I think nothing would be found due. I made no mention of having a lighthouse under my care until the 15th ult. when I received a letter from Mr. Wagner requesting me to forward my papers as fast as I could conveniently. I then replied that I resided upon an island in this Bay, had a lighthouse under my charge, was surrounded by ice and unable to make progress in the settlement of my accounts, pledged my salary, etc. etc.

"If I am really in default, it is not what I expected, and the only reasonable

or plausible excuse I can offer in that case is, at the time I received the money I was from my own circumstances responsible, and that if at any time my expenses exceeded the amount contemplated for contingencies, it was in stage travelling where it will not do for a man with an embroidered collar and cuffs to be seen cleansing his own boots, particularly in the cities of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington.

"Thus far I have received every indulgence that I have solicited or could reasonably expect from the Treasury Dept.; and not to be behindhand or prove myself unworthy of lenity, I have given up the only means of subsistence for myself and my family.—And, Sir, as I am particularly indebted to yourself and Major Brooks for my present employment, I am now only soliticious about the method which I ought to pursue in order to give up this station with credit to myself, and satisfaction to those who procured it for me. I would venture, Sir, to ask your advice, did I not see on the one side Scylla, and on the other Charybdis.—

"Although I have done as yet little in mechanics, I think I have the prospect of producing something in the end that may redeem me from the thralldom of poverty. I would further remark that had I considered it possible that the inconveniences of this kind would have interfered with duty, I should never have applied for this place—and as the keeping of a lighthouse is calculated to afford me more leisure than almost any other employment, I shall give it up with great regret. If any advantages would result from my calling on you, Sir, in Boston, either as regards the lighthouse or otherwise, and it would be convenient for you to see me, I could probably perform the journey and return to my duty in three days.

I am, Sir, very respectfully your obedient and humble servant

William S. Moore

Keeper of Bird Island Lighthouse

Henry A. S. Dearborn, Esq.  
Superintendent of Lighthouses for the State of Massachusetts."

Manuscript details enclosed with letter.

"Method of rendering boats safe in case of filling with water.

"As a cubic foot of confined air, immersed in water, has a buoyancy or upward tendency of about 1000 ozs. avoirdupois, it is evident that heavy bodies may be kept from sinking by means of air properly confined and attached to them. I find that to a boat 20 ft. in length, and 5-6 ft. in width I can attach as much of this buoyant principle as would equal 2000 lbs. without any material inconvenience or waste of room; and by a proper disposition of air and ballast, the boat would be incapable of being thrown into any other position other than that of her usual one in sailing—I shall not at this time go into the full details of views I have taken on the subject, but merely observe that the general principle is the same but susceptible of application in various ways. It is with water carriages as it is with land carriages, they are variously constructed according to the particular use for which they are intended. Some are calculated for passing from one place to another, and some boats, like the chaise, are designed for this purpose rather than for carrying burthens; therefore the principle treated upon, though generally applicable to all boats, should be applied in conformity to their construction and employment.

"The boat on the island here is capable of containing in her prow and stern (in-

side) about 8 cubic feet of air equal to 500 lbs., and in such manner that her appearance would not be varied, in finishing, so as to be noticed.—I mentioned a method of preparing a boat for leaving a ship at sea. This partakes of the above principle, but adapted to the occasion and quickly prepared. I should further observe that the air boxes do not compose a part of the boat, but are distinct and separate for greater safety, and depend for their support on being confined to eye bolts attached to the keel inside. I have many ideas in relation to air and water which I hope under more favorable circumstances to mature at a future time.

#### “Water Lantern.

“This consists of a glass globe or cylinder and (with) air conduits for the purpose of supplying fresh air and allowing the smoke to escape. A globe is preferable to a cylinder as the pressure of the water is equal on all its parts;—to a globe of 15 inches diameter there should be an opening at the top of about 3 inches diameter, to which a cork stopper should be fitted with a pipe passing to the top of the water to convey the smoke. The opening in the bottom should be about 6 inches in diameter and closed in the same way. Through the lower stopper the fresh air conduits (2) pass to the surface. These pipes are connected above the globe by a band passing around them to keep them firm. Attached to the fresh air tubes is the ballast, and to the upper parts of the pipes, a buoy. The lamp is fixed inside upon the inner surface of the lower stopper.—the machine for picking oakum was never carried to perfection, there being one in existence already. I have several other subjects under consideration.

“Velocipede—in continuation of the subject

“I have thought it possible that an improvement might be made in the principle of the Velocipede. I have not motived my plan sufficiently to be able to convey my ideas clearly. I will however offer three observations:—the machine throughout should be constructed with the greatest levity to consist of a body and three wheels, the motion of the wheels to be put in operation by spiral springs which are to receive their power from the tread of the passenger or director upon something communicating them, not unlike the method of playing upon a pianaforte; the velocity of the machine to depend upon the weight and activity of the director. Thus the principle of the lever, wheel and axle are brought into operation, and the perfection of the machine will depend upon the disposition of these principles.

#### “Lamps.—

“I conceive from some experiments that a lamp may be so constructed that the heat provided by the blaze would be sufficient to keep the oil in a perfectly liquid state with the thermometer at or below zero. With such a lamp, summer oil would be equally good for winter as winter pressed (oil). The reason for my giving attention to this subject was the idea that right, or real whale oil could be bought instead of spermacetti. When I become better acquainted with whale oil I can determine this point.

#### “Life Preserver.

“I have under consideration a life preserver of a different construction from any I have ever heard of and calculated to be carried in one’s pocket when not in use,—but when inflated, to be equal to the power of 160 lbs. upon buoyant principles, and to be worn around the body under the arms as a belt or girdle.”

Most of us have been brought up on expressions like Yankee ingenuity without really understanding what they meant. By 1821, American ideas were streaming into the newly established patent office. There were many duplicates due to the fact that Americans were reading British scientific magazines and encyclopaedias recently republished here in New York and Philadelphia and Boston. Everyone was trying to improve mechanical developments with some new quirk by which they could make a million. To study and discuss intelligently the Argand burner, Inspector Lewis' reflecting magnifying lantern and Messrs. Black and Moore's plan for heating whale oil would take pages. Whether these ideas came to keeper Moore out of the blue or out of a book is something we don't have to prove. It would seem only fair to give him the benefit of the doubt, and an honorable mention for his Yankee sticktoitiveness.

Brevity is the soul of wit, and has become the watchword of this day and age. If an article, a pamphlet, an essay or a book drags itself across the pages, no matter how well written, without a murder or a crime, it loses the reader of 1963 very shortly. I shall skip Mr. Moore's

second letter, in which he found that a Mr. Black had patented a lamp on the same principles as his own while he was trying to find time to mail the necessary data. He passed his disappointment off lightly and promised further discoveries and inventions. His determination to stick to his post and make good, stands out in every line.

Why should the name of General Dearborn be honored, preserved and collected while his lieutenant's lies buried at the bottom of a stack of old letters, waiting for no better grave than the next paper drive? Some people carry an elk's tooth, some an old coin and others a rabbit's foot, and draw aces when needed. Many great men and women struggle through their lives doing more real genuine productive sincere good for their own small communities, their State and their Country than many who govern them, and leave the stage with no fanfare of trumpet. They come and go like the leaves in spring and fall, and very few are ever saved and pressed in a scrapbook for posterity. Without them the United States of America would not be the great nation it is today.