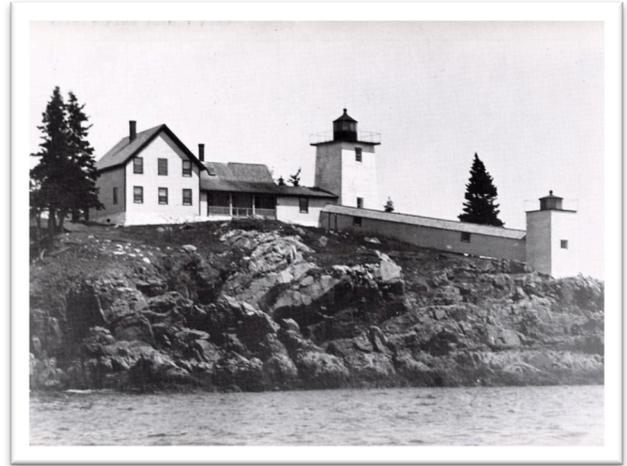


The Little Tower, A Shipwreck, & Some Swan's Island Heroes

In old photos of the Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station, you can see two light towers, the smaller front tower standing about where the bell house is today. What happened to the little tower? It's a story that begins with a stormy night in March, 1883 -- and a tragic shipwreck.

When the light station was built in 1872, the plan was that vessels coming into the harbor would use the two lights as range lights. But someone had miscalculated. Range lights have to be far enough apart so that there is a narrow passage where the two lights line up. The two towers at Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station were too close together. A vessel coming in to the harbor could line up the lights and still run into danger.

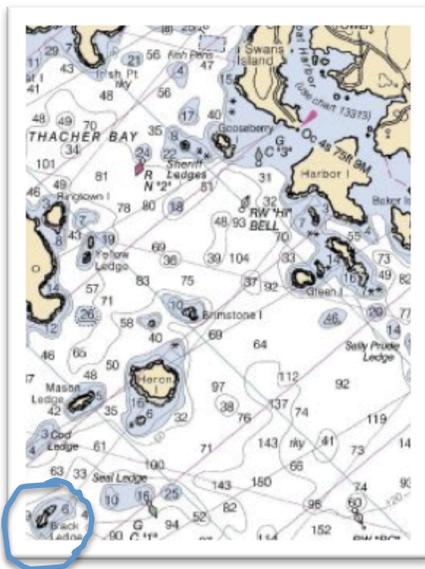


That is what happened on March 7, 1883.

The schooner *J W Sawyer* was

returning to Portland from Georges Bank, loaded with fresh fish. Coming in from the east in a thick snowstorm, Captain John Orchard decided to shelter overnight in Burnt Coat Harbor. At about 8 pm the captain had the Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station range lights exactly lined up, and the schooner was preparing to make a run for the harbor. But she was south of Heron Island amid a cluster of dangerous ledges and soon struck hard on Black Ledge (lower left corner of the chart). There were 16 men aboard, and over the next several hours they struggled to make it from the damaged schooner to the relative safety of the ledge.

A reporter for the Portland *Argus* newspaper interviewed Captain Orchard and described his ordeal:



In leaving the vessel he was caught by a sea and swept from the rocks under the vessel's bottom. He came to the surface again, and again reached the rock and was again washed away into the sea. The third time he reached the rock, when a sea struck him, throwing him on his back and he was being drifted away. He was sinking but had presence of mind enough to kick his foot out of the water, when it was fortunately seized by one of the men on the rock, and he was dragged up.

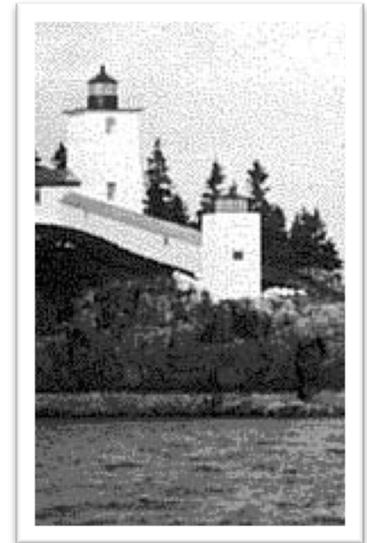
Three other crew members did not make it to the rocks, and a fourth made it, but suffered a broken leg.

The crew had managed to bring one dory up onto the ledge, and on Thursday afternoon four men set out in the dory to row about two miles to Marshall Island. They reached the island and made contact with John Lane, who rowed to Swan's Island for help. As the *Argus* reported, "[B]eing in the ice all night" he had "nearly perished when he reached Swan's Island." The first Swan's Islander located was George Hall, who gathered some men for a rescue party. One can only imagine the relief of the men of the *Sawyer* when they saw their rescuers approaching.

By Friday evening, 48 hours after the wreck, all survivors – the captain and 12 crew members -- were safe on Swan's Island. The *Argus* reported that Captain Orchard "and the survivors of his crew are filled with gratitude for the kindness shown them by all the good people on Marshal and Swan's Islands."

It was not exactly news to Swan's Islanders that the range lights did not work. As the Light House Inspector's report on the wreck explained, the lights were not used by those familiar with the harbor, and "only serve as a snare to strangers trying to make use of them – as in the case of the Schooner *Sawyer* – for if there had been but one light she never would have attempted to enter the harbor on such a stormy night."

The wreck of the *J. W. Sawyer* convinced the Light-House Board that they should discontinue the lower range light, and the tower went dark in the summer of 1883. For several years thereafter, the little tower remained, unlit, useful only as a daymark. On June 6, 1902, the Board authorized the keeper to remove the unused tower. That, at least, happened quickly: on June 16, 1902, Keeper Orin Milan recorded in his logbook: *The little tower went over about 2 pm.*



Sources:

Sufferings of Shipwrecked Men, Portland (ME) *Argus*, March 20, 1883. © NYTimes. Available on www.nytimes.com.

Keeper's Log, Burnt Coat Harbor Light Station, National Archives RG26, E80

Letter dated April 27, 1883, from A.S. Crowninshield, Light-House Inspector, 1st District, to Vice-Admiral Stephen C. Rowan, USN, Chairman, Light-House Board. National Archives RG 26, Light-House Service General Correspondence Vol.559, p.532.